

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE HIDDEN MASTERPIECE





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
HIDDEN MASTERPIECE**

The Jones Salvage Yard receives a couple of unusual enquiries on rare mechanical toys known as Mobimecs. Incidentally, Jupiter finds a riddle about the toy and decides to explore this together with Pete and Bob. Soon, they learn that the creator of Mobimecs has disappeared without a trace, and that there is a certain mysterious masterpiece hidden by him. As usual, there is somebody at work to stop The Three Investigators from progressing. However, this time, it is for a very different reason.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Hidden Masterpiece

*Original German text by
André Marx*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Der geheime Schlüssel

(The Three ???: The Secret Key)

by

André Marx

(2004)

Cover art by

Silvia Christoph

(2022-08-23)

Contents

- 1. A Key for a Mechanical Toy**
- 2. A Bug for Jeremy**
- 3. A Drink for Caitlin**
- 4. A Job for Pete**
- 5. A Dance for the Sugar Plum Fairy**
- 6. A Cave for the Scuttle Bug**
- 7. A Message for the Kopperschmidts**
- 8. A Task for the Black Lady**
- 9. A Threat for the Investigators**
- 10. A Lamp for the Boy Scout**
- 11. A Church for Augustine**
- 12. A Riddle for Jupiter**
- 13. A Warning for the Boys**
- 14. A Mission for Bob**
- 15. A Solution for the Riddle**
- 16. A Journey for the Home Express**
- 17. A Copper Egg for All**
- 18. A Masterpiece for Felix**

1. A Key for a Mechanical Toy

When Jupiter Jones put the mechanical monkey on the ground, it started jumping like crazy in a circle and the metal discs in its hands started rattling against each other. Meanwhile, the key in its back whirled in an anti-clockwise manner until the mechanical spring inside the toy lost its tension and the monkey came to a halt with one last clatter.

Jupiter looked at the young woman, who had enquired about old mechanical toys, for a reaction, but the lady with the dark hair just twisted her mouth in displeasure. “That’s not exactly what I had in mind,” she said.

“I see,” replied Jupiter. Out of the corner of his eye he scanned the grounds of The Jones Salvage Yard for his uncle and aunt. This customer seemed to be a difficult one and he preferred to leave her to his guardians. However, neither Uncle Titus nor Aunt Mathilda was anywhere to be seen.

“What do you have in mind?” Jupiter asked. “I think we still have wind-up mechanical cars somewhere. I’d have to ask my uncle if—”

“It does not matter what kind of toy it is,” the woman interrupted him and tightened her dark suit. “It only matters who made it. I’m looking exclusively for toys made by the Kopperschmidt Company. In fact, a toy that matches this key...” She rummaged through her expensive-looking black handbag and held a small key under Jupiter’s nose.

Jupiter took it and looked at it closely. He could see that it had a heptagonal hollow metal pin. The name ‘Kopperschmidt’ was engraved in small, curved letters, along with a logo featuring a stylized key.

“Well,” Jupiter said at a loss. “I must confess, I have no idea if we have anything from the Kopperschmidt Company here, but I’ll ask my uncle... Here he comes right now. One moment!”

Jupiter was glad to have finally spotted Uncle Titus and to be able to get away from the customer. He hurried towards the small, wiry man with the huge black moustache.

“Uncle Titus! A customer over there is asking for mechanical toys from the Kopperschmidt Company. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Kopperschmidt? Of course! They are very valuable collector’s items, but I’m afraid I don’t have any in stock right now. I sold the last one last week.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, because someone else was here this morning asking about it as well.”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders and returned to the customer. She was not very enthusiastic. “I was told I could find anything in The Jones Junkyard.”

“The Jones Salvage Yard,” Jupiter corrected the lady, “and it’s usually true, but of course we cannot guarantee that we have everything in stock at all times. Maybe you just drop by again sometime. It is quite possible that in a few days—”

“Would it be possible to notify me if any items by Felix Kopperschmidt came in?” The customer rummaged through her purse one more time.

“Of course. We always strive to satisfy our customers. If you give me your address—”

She gave Jupe a business card. “Call me!”

It did not often happen that Jupiter Jones was speechless. Now he could only accept the card wordlessly and nod.

A moment later, the customer had turned on her heel and was heading for the exit.

Shaking his head, Jupiter watched her leaving. Then he took a look at her business card. It said:

Caitlin Kopperschmidt

Lawyer

2. A Bug for Jeremy

The next day after school, the Second Investigator Pete Crenshaw entered the salvage yard and walked purposefully towards the dusty old mobile home trailer which was standing at the edge of the grounds in the sun.

At first glance, one might have thought that the trailer was just another piece of junk like the stripped car wrecks and the broken kitchen equipment around it, but that was only the outer appearance. Inside the trailer, Pete, Jupiter and their friend, Bob Andrews, had set up an office for their investigation agency. This trailer was their headquarters—their base of operations when they were working on a case, or even just their meeting place in their free time, where they sat in front of the computer or TV for hours.

At the trailer door, Pete found a letter slotted in the gap between the door and door frame. Probably Aunt Mathilda had put it there. Curious, he took the letter. It was addressed to Jupiter and postmarked in New York, and the sender was... Lys de Kerk!

Pete was startled. Lys was Jupiter's girlfriend... or ex-girlfriend...

Pete hadn't seen Lys for months, and Jupiter hadn't said a word about her for at least as long. It had seemed strange to the Second Investigator that Lys suddenly seemed to play no role in Jupiter's life, but he had never dared to ask. This letter would perhaps explain why Jupiter had been keeping quiet for so long.

For a moment, Pete wondered whether he should open the envelope secretly with the help of hot steam and then... no. He regained his inner order and opened the door to Headquarters. The dark, warm interior was, as usual, in chaos. Bob, the investigator in charge of records and research, was entering their last case report into the computer while Jupe was engrossed in a thick book.

"You have mail," Pete imitated a computer voice and handed Jupe the envelope, without letting him out of his sight.

Jupiter took a look at the letter and put it on the desk. "Thank you."

"Don't you want to read the letter?" Pete asked.

"Sure, sure."

"Well, open it!"

"Later."

"When is later?"

"Later... when you're not looking over my shoulder."

"Well, listen! I would never do that."

"No?" Jupiter put away the book, opened the envelope and unfolded the letter.

Pete, who almost died of curiosity, forced himself to look elsewhere. Bob grinned inside himself as he pretended not to notice the banter between his two friends.

Finally Jupiter folded the letter, put it back in the envelope and returned to his reading.

Pete started to ask a question, but even before he brought out the first word, there was a timid knock at the door. Bob, who was sitting right by the window, looked outside.

"Your uncle," he said, amazed. "How nice. While your aunt screams all over the yard, Uncle Titus knocks politely on the door."

Jupiter opened the door. "Uncle Titus! What's up?"

“There’s a customer asking about Kopperschmidt toys... a collector, apparently. I told him we don’t have anything at the moment... but then I remembered the lady from yesterday. Didn’t she leave you her business card? I thought maybe we could work something out for both of them.”

Jupiter smiled. That was typical of Uncle Titus—always concerned with providing the best service to potential customers, even if it was only about mechanical toys.

“I’ll take care of it,” Jupiter said, took another look at the envelope that lay on the desk and stepped outside to the salvage yard.

The man was hardly taller than Uncle Titus and of a similar wiry stature, but much younger. He was holding a small wooden box. His dark hair stood tangled from his head, and he had a friendly, boyish face. Somehow, Jupiter found him familiar, without knowing exactly why.

“Good afternoon. I am Jupiter Jones. My uncle told me you were looking for mechanical toys?”

“My name is Jeremy,” the man introduced himself and reached out to Jupiter. “I’m not looking for just any mechanical toys... I’m looking for Mobimecs. More precisely, arms and legs for Mobimecs... and keys.”

Jupiter frowned. “Forgive me, Jeremy, but I’ve never heard of it. What’s a Mobimec?”

“This...” Jeremy held out the wooden box, and the First Investigator saw the Kopperschmidt logo on it. Then Jeremy opened the lid to show Jupiter the underside where there was some writing on the rough wood. It said:

*A Mobimec that won’t be moving,
A leg that won’t be walking,
A key that won’t be turning,
Until someone understands its meaning.*

Jupiter frowned again, but then his attention was already drawn to what Jeremy was taking out of the wooden box. It was a copper-coloured oval figure about 40 centimetres in length, with a clown-like face and hair of copper wire wool. Filigree metal pins protruded from the torso where the arms and legs should have been, but were missing.

When Jupiter took a look inside the figure through a small gap in a joint, he saw a densely packed tangle of gears and springs. There was a key opening on the back of the torso, which was obviously intended for winding up the mechanism.

“This is an original Mobimec from the Kopperschmidt Company. This specimen is a Scuttle Bug. Unfortunately, I don’t have the key, so I came here.”

Jupiter could not wipe away a grin. “Scuttle Bug?”

“Yeah. It is called that because it looks like a bug and it scuttles around—that is if I can find limbs for it, and of course, a key to wind it up. There’s a whole series of them, all handmade, each with its own unique key, but I thought I might be able to find a key that fits into this one.”

Jupiter frowned and took a closer look at the key opening. It was heptagonal. “That can’t be a coincidence,” he murmured.

“What do you think?” Jeremy asked.

“Yesterday a customer was here who also asked about Kopperschmidt toys,” explained Jupiter. “Unfortunately we don’t have anything in stock at the moment, but the lady left her business card here. Perhaps you would like to get in touch with her.”

Jupiter rummaged in his pocket, pulled out the card and handed it to Jeremy, but the man just took a quick look at the name and from one second to the next, his open, friendly charisma turned into blatant rejection. He laughed bitterly. “No way!”

“You know this lady?” Jupiter asked in surprise.

“Do I know her? In fact, it’s absolutely unthinkable that I should contact her.”

“May I ask why?”

“It’s a long story, and it would not interest you. Anyway, I won’t talk to her. Let’s leave it at that.”

Jupiter considered for a moment whether he should go into it, but then decided not to. However, another question had been on his mind since yesterday: “Say, it’s surely no coincidence that Caitlin Kopperschmidt and the toy manufacturer have the same surname, isn’t it?”

Jeremy shook his head. “No, it’s not a coincidence. Caitlin is Felix Kopperschmidt’s daughter.”

“Okay...” Jupe said, “and she collects her father’s toys?”

Again Jeremy laughed cheerlessly. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Then why did she have a key and not the toy that came with it?”

“She... she has a key?” Jeremy expressed surprise.

“Yes. A heptagonal key. I saw it myself. Without knowing anything about this business, I would say that the key could fit your... Scuttle Bug. You think that’s a coincidence?”

For a moment, Jeremy was silent. Thoughtfully, he looked at the toy in his hand.

“No,” he murmured. “This is certainly no coincidence... but I don’t want to bother you with this any further. It was nice of you to help me. I must be going now.”

Even before Jupiter could reply, Jeremy had already turned around. As he walked to the street, he frantically put the Scuttle Bug back into the box. He was in such a hurry that it slipped out of his hand and fell to the ground. He quickly picked it up, got into his car and drove off.

“Goodbye,” Jupiter mumbled and watched him. Then his gaze fell to the ground. There lay a small folded piece of paper that had not been there before. Had it fallen out of the box without Jeremy knowing?

Jupiter wanted to run after the man, but the sound of the engine died away in the distance. With a shrug of the shoulders, Jupiter picked up the paper. It was probably just a shopping list.

On the way back to Headquarters, he unfolded it—and stopped in surprise. No, it was not a shopping list, but a poem written in squiggly black handwriting:

*A crawler with no arm and no leg,
And it doesn't even have a key.
Now its home has also gone missing,
So nothing works, but how could that be?*

*Go find everything that is missing,
It is the only thing that matters.
The home that the crawler is seeking,
Is at a place that's torn in tatters.*

*The place has by now crumbled to dust,
Only the red tower is intact.*

*However, few had dared to climb it,
For it's dangerous, and that's a fact.*

*There is one way to solve the puzzle,
And that is to go up the ladder.
For whoever climbs right to the top,
Will be very close to the answer.*

3. A Drink for Caitlin

When Jupiter returned to Headquarters and glanced at Lys's letter, he noticed it immediately—the torn side of the envelope was pointed in a different direction. He looked at Pete angrily. "Could it be that you have something to tell me, Pete?"

"I, uh... you... you mean—"

"You read my letter."

"I..." Pete began, and fell silent. Whatever Jupe had found out, there was no point in denying it. The only thing that helped was to run away. "That's right. Why didn't you tell us that Lys went to college in New York?"

"Because it's none of your business!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pete said. "After all, she's your friend... or was..."

Jupiter replied nothing.

"—Or was it?" Pete repeated, but this time as a question.

"I do not see why I should answer questions about my private life to someone who abuses my trust by reading my mail," Jupiter said coolly.

"Goodness, Jupe... Bob and I, we're your private life! And yet we don't know what really happened between you and Lys. Don't you find that kind of weird?"

The First Investigator let himself fall back in his chair and sighed. Frowning, he played with the letter between his fingers.

"Well?" Pete continued to probe.

"We're over, if you want to know for sure," replied Jupiter, irritated, "and has been for quite a while now."

"And why?" asked Pete.

"Because... I don't know. It just didn't fit. She was older and too beautiful... and I was too young and too fat... and then she went to New York. I didn't tell you at first because... I don't know why. Is that enough?"

Pete shook his head decidedly. "No, that's absolutely not enough. How come we're just finding out about this now? Since when do we not talk about such things?"

"We never talked much about such things... with good reason," Jupe said. "All this sentimentality is a distraction from our investigation work."

"Nonsense!" Pete burst out. "We don't have a case in progress."

"Yes, we do. We just did." Jupe put the letter from Lys in his trouser pocket and pulled out the note that Jeremy dropped. He proudly presented it to his friends and told them about the strange customer and the lady who had been there the day before. However, Pete did not jump on it.

"You just want to distract yourself from Lys," Pete commented.

Jupiter sighed. "Your lack of enthusiasm for unusual events in everyday life is deplorable."

"I find it more deplorable that you keep quiet about everything important that happens in your life," Pete continued.

"Pete, please—"

"No, seriously. We should talk this out. Absolutely!" Pete insisted.

“Fine!” Jupiter replied irritated. “But not now! Okay?”

“Okay.”

The First Investigator took a deep breath and turned back to the note. “I find the story of this Scuttle Bug really fascinating... and this strange text here... I’m not even sure if Jeremy even knew that this paper was in his possession. It might have fallen out of the box because it slipped out of his hand... which reminds me... there was this strange writing on the lid of his wooden box. Something about Mobimecs, keys and legs... and it was in the same handwriting. Weird, isn’t it? A good investigator should always have an eye and an ear for such bizarre coincidences.”

“Well, I’m really excited about it too,” Bob said.

Jupiter threw an appreciative glance at him. “Look at that!” He held the note against the light. There was a watermark in the paper—a stylized key. “This is the trademark of the Kopperschmidt Company,” explained Jupiter. “So what do you say to this?”

Pete frowned. “What do we say to what?”

“Come on, Pete!” Jupe urged. “An enigmatic toy manufacturer. Two fanatical collectors who show up here on two consecutive days. No, wait, three collectors! Uncle Titus was talking about another customer who came here yesterday morning... and then a poem with the Kopperschmidt logo turns up, which, if you ask me, is much more than just a poem, namely—”

“A puzzle,” Bob interrupted him. “You believe that, don’t you, Jupe?”

Jupe nodded. “Isn’t it obvious? In this poem, someone is asked to do something... which is to find something the crawler is missing. This crawler, I presume, is the Scuttle Bug, and it is missing arms and legs, a key and a home. I’d say we’ve already solved part of the mystery—Caitlin has the key. The home appears to be in a secret location somewhere inside a red tower... and the arms and legs... well, the fact is that the mechanical bug Jeremy showed me had missing limbs.”

“What does that mean?” Pete asked. “You’re not going to get serious about this funny poem, are you?”

“The poem is a puzzle, Pete!” Jupiter replied emphatically. “It’s a riddle to be specific. What else would I want to occupy myself with?”

“How is it that whenever any person in California writes a puzzle, sooner or later that puzzle ends up on our desks?” Bob asked.

“It’s because of Jupe,” Pete said. “Our First Investigator magically attracts puzzles... and so far it’s brought us nothing but trouble. Fine! Now that it’s lying around here—what’s the solution, Jupe? Or don’t you know it yet?”

“As accurate as your assessment of my mental abilities is, Pete, in this case I’m afraid I must disappoint you. I’m still at a total loss. So I suggest a little brainstorming—a place that has crumbled to dust with only a red tower that is intact. Are you up for it?”

But no matter how hard The Three Investigators thought, they could not connect anything at all with these keywords.

Finally, Bob hesitantly said: “I have an idea... How about focusing less on the riddle and more on the person who might be able to help us solve it?”

“Jeremy?” Jupiter asked. “The thought has occurred to me as well. However, it will be difficult to contact him. I only know his first name.”

Bob shook his head. “I’m not talking about Jeremy, I’m talking about the woman who came by yesterday and gave you her card. What’s her name? Catherine?”

“Caitlin!” Jupiter cried and slapped himself on his forehead.

“Of course! Geez, Bob, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because it would be boring if only the First Investigator had flashes of inspiration,” Bob said with a grin. “I’m sure Caitlin can tell us something about Scuttle Bugs, keys and the Kopperschmidt Company. That should take us a step further.”

“Absolutely right, Bob!” Jupiter went through his pocket until he found her business card. Fortunately, she wrote down her home address and contact number on the back of the card.

“She lives in Santa Monica. We’d better get going.”

Caitlin Kopperschmidt lived in a chic apartment building in the middle of Santa Monica. Jupiter, Bob and Pete took the lift to the fourth floor and rang her doorbell.

To their amazement, however, it was not Caitlin herself who opened the door, but a tall man in a black suit who looked as if he had just come out of an aftershave commercial. “May I help you?”

“Good evening. My name is Jupiter Jones. We would like to speak to Miss Kopperschmidt.”

The man frowned. “Is she expecting you?”

“Not exactly... but she gave us her card.” Jupiter held Caitlin’s card out to the man to prove it.

The man turned around and called out: “Caitlin?”

“What’s the matter, George?” it came from inside a room.

“There are three boys here to see you.”

A moment later, she stood next to him in the doorway. “Well, if it isn’t the boy from the junkyard.”

“Salvage yard,” Jupiter corrected her. “These are my colleagues Bob Andrews and Pete Crenshaw. Sorry to bother you, Miss Kopperschmidt, but you gave us your card in case we got new toys in.”

“Yes.” Caitlin smiled for the first time and walked away excited. “Come on in.”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob entered a spacious apartment completely furnished with the finest designer furniture. Quiet jazz music came out of ultra-modern loudspeakers.

“I was just about to make myself a drink.” Caitlin headed for a little home bar where she put the ingredients for a cocktail in a shaker. “Would you like one?” she asked The Three Investigators without turning around. “Oh no, you’re too young for that.”

She picked up the shaker, but instead of shaking it herself, she placed it in a strange metal structure. Jupiter stepped forward to take a closer look. It was two hands of metal protruding from a copper-coloured cube. The hands seemed to be fully flexible and they held the shaker tightly.

Caitlin turned a key that was on the right side of the cube. Rattling, a spring was wound up inside. Then she released the key—and Jupiter was speechless with delight. The metal hands shook the shaker—up and down, back and forth, at a furious pace and with an incredible racket. For a moment, one could really believe that the hands belonged to a real person who had hidden somewhere under the counter, but of course that was not possible. Jupiter and Pete watched the spectacle with fascination.

Little by little, the hands slowed down and finally stopped completely—but then the most amazing thing happened. The right hand opened the lid, while the left hand slowly tilted the shaker—and poured a light green drink into a waiting glass. Not a single drop missed. Then the mechanical hands moved back to their original position—and stood still with a last click.

Smiling with satisfaction, Caitlin reached for her glass and took a sip.

“That was... absolutely incredible!” Jupiter marvelled. “I’ve never seen anything like it in my life!”

“Crazy!” Pete agreed.

“Isn’t it?” Caitlin replied, not without pride. “The ‘Handshake’—that’s what my father called this invention. He gave it to me for my 21st birthday.”

“Are there any more marvels like this?” Bob asked.

“A lot. I’d like to show them to you, but first let’s get to the reason for your visit. You actually got some new merchandise that’s for sale?”

“Well, not exactly,” Pete began, but Jupiter took the floor immediately.

“To be honest, Miss Kopperschmidt, we’re here out of curiosity,” Jupe said.

In an instant, Caitlin’s friendliness turned into suspicion. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, we are interested in unusual occurrences,” continued the First Investigator cautiously, “and these Mobimecs and Scuttle Bugs... you must admit that such toys are quite bizarre.”

Caitlin’s eyes narrowed. “Scuttle Bugs?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know about Scuttle Bugs? I never mentioned them to you.”

“Well, we... have been informed,” Jupiter evaded the question, “and have concluded that your key is probably for a mechanical Scuttle Bug.”

Caitlin Kopperschmidt’s distrust turned into icy rejection. “Craig...”

“Excuse me?”

“Craig is behind this, isn’t he? Or Jeremy... or even both. I knew it.”

She took a threatening step forward and pushed The Three Investigators towards the exit. “Listen, you three wise guys. I don’t know what this silly game is all about or who thought it up, but I don’t care! Say hello to my brothers and tell them to leave me alone!”

“But Miss Kopperschmidt—” Bob began.

“Out!”

4. A Job for Pete

The sun leaned towards the horizon and hung as a glowing red ball over the sea as The Three Investigators slowly cycled through the picturesque, bright streets of Santa Monica on their way home.

"That was a complete flop," Bob summed up their visit to Caitlin Kopperschmidt.

"You could say that again," Pete agreed. "We never even got around to asking anything or even mentioning the poem."

Jupiter was the only one who didn't seem to mind being kicked out so soon. "A complete flop? Not at all, fellas. Our visit has been most informative."

"How so?" Pete asked.

"We now know Jeremy is Caitlin's brother, and so is a certain Craig," Jupe explained. "Furthermore, it is now apparent that there is indeed some mystery... and that the three Kopperschmidt siblings are estranged. Isn't that interesting?"

"Fine," Pete agreed, "but what do we do with it? I don't think that would help us with this mystery."

"We do have a lead," contradicted Jupiter. "We now know Jeremy's last name. This should make it a lot easier to find out where he lives. We'll go to his house—"

"—To get another rejection?" Pete interrupted him. "Thank you very much, I can do without that."

They came to a junction. Jupiter looked to the left. "I think Jeremy is a lot easier to deal with than Caitlin." He looked to his right. "Also..." he paused, and stared up the street for seconds. Then he turned his bike and headed for the mountains.

"Hey, Jupe!" cried Pete. "Where are you going? Are we not supposed to go home?"

"We're not going home!" Jupiter replied over his shoulder and pedalled faster.

"Where then?" Pete asked.

"To the red tower!" Jupe exclaimed.

"To... what?"

Wordlessly, Jupiter pointed to the front. They were on Cedar Grove Road, which led out of downtown Santa Monica through the small industrial and commercial area into the mountains, which was now glowing golden in the light of the setting sun.

Between the roofs of the city and the yellow-brown hills, a few grey factory buildings and warehouses could be seen... and then there was this a huge, red factory tower, which rose far above everything else and stood enthroned above the city like a monument.

It took a moment for Bob and Pete to grasp the situation.

"You... you mean that's the red tower?" Bob asked.

"The home that the crawler is seeking..." Jupiter recalled from the riddle, "is at a place that has crumbled to dust... specifically in a red tower, where few had dared to climb. Almost certainly no one has entered this place for a long time as the area is cordoned off."

"Why is this place crumbled to dust?" asked Pete, who still didn't quite believe that they had actually found the red tower.

"Don't tell me you don't know the history of this old factory?"

"I... uh..." Pete made a helpless face. "Is that something I would know?"

"If you've lived near here since you were a kid, like us—yes."

"Okay, I confess," Pete said. "I've never heard of it. Tell me."

"This tower belongs to the old factory," Bob took over. "The factory, however, never went into operation because shortly before the complex was completed, there was a severe earthquake and everything collapsed—everything except the tower, which miraculously remained intact. The company was, of course, broke, so the factory was never rebuilt, but the tower was left standing, and it serves no purpose at all."

"—And the tower is built with red bricks, as you can clearly see," Jupiter added. "hence, the red tower."

"Geez, Jupe!" cried Pete. "It all fits together."

"That's what I've been thinking. So, fellas, let's take a closer look at the red tower!"

The former factory site was completely overgrown. Trees and shrubs grew on sandy soil within the ruins of the old factory. A wire fence surrounded the site, but The Three Investigators easily overcame this obstacle by climbing up a large and rusty waste container placed next to the fence. Within minutes, they were standing at the foot of the brick tower.

"Somehow there's something about it," Pete said as he tilted his head back and looked to the top. The clouds moving across the sky glowed in postcard pink and created the illusion that the tower was tilting towards them, but of course it had been rock solid for decades. "I wonder if there really is something hidden up there."

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "'For whoever climbs right to the top, will be very close to the answer...'," he quoted from the riddle and then looked at the Second Investigator.

It took Pete a while to realize. "Wait a minute!" he burst out. "Why are you looking at me like that, Jupe? You don't mean that I—"

"Who else?"

"You want me to go up there?"

"The riddle leaves little room for interpretation. This is the place. The home of the Scuttle Bug is up there."

"All right, but we don't have a Scuttle Bug, so what's the point of going up there?"

"To see if I'm right."

"But—" Pete objected.

"Come on, Pete," Bob said in a flattering voice. "This is really not a problem for you. There are rungs on the wall and a safety cage for protection. It's no more difficult than climbing a ladder."

"More difficult, perhaps not, but higher... and can't you see that the rungs and the safety cage are all rusted. Moreover, it's forbidden. You see?" Pete pointed to a sign beside one of the bottom rungs. It said: 'No Trespassing!'

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders unmoved. "You are not entering the tower, but climb it. So what's the problem?"

"What if this thing collapses?"

"This tower has withstood every earthquake so far," Jupe reasoned. "If it were in the slightest danger of collapsing, the Santa Monica City Council would have had it demolished long ago. So, Pete, up you go!"

"Why don't you climb it yourself?"

"Because I'm afraid of heights," Jupiter replied, "and you are not."

"Since when are you afraid of heights?" Pete asked.

"Since just now."

Pete sighed. It was always the same. When it came to tasks involving physical exertion, he was the first choice, and rightly so, of course. If he imagined Jupiter climbing up there, the First Investigator would probably bring down that earthquake-proof tower just by his weight alone. No, Pete would rather climb it himself.

“All right. There’s no point in arguing with you anyway.”

The Second Investigator courageously reached for a rung at chest height, placed his foot on the lowest one and climbed up.

Sure enough, the rungs and safety cage were rusty and rough, but they were solidly embedded in the masonry. After a hesitant start, Pete soon lost his fear and climbed up faster and faster. He let his eyes wander. The view was magnificent. He could see all over Santa Monica. In the distance, he could even see some of the houses of Rocky Beach. On the other side, the shadowy outlines of the skyscrapers of Los Angeles could be seen in the haze. On the horizon, the Pacific Ocean glittered golden-red like a carpet of pure light.

Then Pete looked down... and instantly he became dizzy. He wasn’t afraid of heights, but from this perspective it looked as if the tower had the diameter of a blade of grass and couldn’t even withstand the extra weight of a grasshopper, let alone a full-grown person climbing up at its side. Jupe and Bob were just colourful patches far, far below him. Pete turned his stomach and forced himself to look up again.

“Just climb, rung by rung. If anything, there’s still the safety cage!” he thought to himself. “So don’t think, just climb!”

But the higher Pete went, the more the wind tugged at his hair, and the tower became thinner and thinner. He almost had the feeling he was staggering.

Despite his fear and his uneasy stomach, he climbed the last stretch until he could see into the only opening of the tower up here—it was a window with a rusty grille.

There was something there. It was a wooden box, on which the Kopperschmidt logo was emblazoned. Pete stretched his arm in and just managed to grab hold of the box. It was lighter than it looked. Carefully, he got it past the window grille. It was too big to put in his jacket pocket, so he just slipped it between his body and his jacket.

Now it was time to get down from here! He felt a stronger wind now, so he carefully climbed down. After all, he had already got the box, so he just needed to get down safely.

About halfway down, Pete paused for a while to catch his breath. Suddenly a deafening bang ripped the air and a brick shattered somewhere above him.

It was a gun shot!

Pete was so startled, he almost let go. Then his heart began to race, and he clung all the harder to the rusty rungs. He looked down in panic. Bob and Jupiter gesticulated wildly, shouted something, but Pete couldn’t hear a single word. He looked around wildly and probably could see half the Californian Pacific coast from where he was. The shooter could hide practically anywhere.

He had to get off that tower! Right away!

He moved towards the ground in no time at all. He felt terribly defenceless, as if he was on display for a whole horde of trigger-happy lunatics. Every second, he expected another attack. He managed the last metres—and finally had solid ground under his feet again.

Trembling, he went down on his knees. Only now did he realize how exhausting the climb had been.

“Pete!” Jupiter cried worriedly and reached for his friend’s shoulder. “Is everything okay?”

“What can I say? I didn’t get shot, if that’s what you mean by ‘okay’,” Pete said. “Who was that? Who shot at me? Did you see anything?”

“Nothing. The shot came from nowhere. However, the bullet hole would indicate from which direction and distance—”

“Forget it, Jupe!” Pete intervened. “I want to get out of here—out of the line of fire, and I mean now!”

Bob and Jupiter did not object. A minute later, they were on their way back to Headquarters.

Jupiter took a look out the window. It was dark outside by now—about as dark as the atmosphere inside the trailer. He turned back to his friends. Pete still had horror written all over his face.

“Listen, Pete, maybe that shot was nothing more than a very silly coincidence,” Jupiter tried to calm his friend.

“It’s okay,” Pete said frantically. “You’re probably right—a coincidence, yes. Let’s just not talk about it anymore, okay? Because as soon as we talk about it, I start shaking, and it’s very uncomfortable, so... let’s just do something else. All right?”

Jupiter didn’t think it was okay, but if Pete wanted it that way... he nodded.

“We could finally deal with this wooden box,” Bob timidly suggested. “After all, it was the reason of... well... all the trouble.”

“Sure!” Pete said, forced himself to smile and reached for the box. “A Kopperschmidt box, that’s what it is... and what’s in it? This better be worth my effort!”

He ran his fingers over the cracked wood on the lid and looked at Jupiter questioningly. The First Investigator nodded encouragingly and Pete lifted the lid.

In it was a tuft of wood wool. Carefully he removed it and gradually uncovered the object hidden inside. It looked like a miniature mountain for a model railway, only that the plastic was milky white. On one side there was a hole, like the entrance to a tunnel... or a cave. Pete took it out of the box and put it on the desk.

“It’s a cave... the home of the Scuttle Bug,” Jupiter noted, and his eyes shone as he pointed to the opening. “Yes, the cave entrance looks just big enough for the Bug to crawl in.”

“What does the Bug look like?” Bob asked.

“Oval—like a huge ladybird, only that it is copper-coloured,” Jupe replied.

“Well, to me, this mountain is just a plastic thing,” Pete remarked. “What are we supposed to do with it?”

Now Bob reached for the plastic mountain and took a look into the cave entrance. However, he could not see anything unusual. “Well, it looks like we’re not gonna find out.”

“—Until we have the Scuttle Bug,” Jupiter pursued the thought further, “which means that we should definitely pay Jeremy a visit. He has the Bug. It may be missing arms, legs and a key, but maybe with his help we can solve part of the mystery.”

“There’s just one tiny problem...” Bob said. “We don’t know where Jeremy lives... and I doubt that Caitlin will tell us.”

Jupiter nodded. “Then I guess this is a case for you, Bob. Find out everything you can about Felix Kopperschmidt, his company, his Mobimecs and his children! Somehow something will give us a lead!”

The next day was a Saturday. Bob had used the morning off from school to do research in the library, on the Internet and at the newspaper archives. He was a specialist when it came to gathering information. Nowhere did he feel more comfortable than between bookshelves and

in old, dusty archives. He always felt a bit like an archaeologist searching for long forgotten secrets.

When The Three Investigators met at Headquarters in the afternoon, Bob was armed with a small stack of papers consisting of photocopies, printouts and notes.

“So?” Jupiter asked curiously. “What did you find out about Felix Kopperschmidt and his company?”

“Quite a bit,” Bob said, leafing through his papers. “The Kopperschmidt family is from Switzerland. They are known there as outstanding master watchmakers for generations, and one of these watchmakers is Felix Kopperschmidt. He emigrated to America at a young age and started a family.

“Here in California, he developed a completely new business idea. He no longer made watches, but mechanical toys, albeit at an extremely high level and sophistication. Strictly speaking, they are not children toys at all, since no child could ever afford the valuable individual pieces. There is a highly developed mechanism in every single creation that allows the toys to do things that go far beyond just the bouncing of little monkeys or the mere movement of cars.”

“We saw that,” Pete said. “The ‘Handshake’ was awesome.”

“What else did you find out?” Jupe asked.

“The Kopperschmidt Company employed a dozen people in its heyday. Felix developed the Mobimecs on paper and had them produced by his extremely talented employees. For a while, they were very productive and successful and sold Mobimecs all over the world. Among wealthy people, it became a kind of insider tip to invest in Kopperschmidt toys. They became real collectables. However, little by little, the company shrank, until production ceased altogether several years ago.”

“Is Kopperschmidt still around?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes, but he had retired. Since he was the creative head of his company, it was out of the question for one of his employees to take over the business. So the company was abandoned... Kopperschmidt should be in his mid-sixties today.”

“Is he still living in California?” Pete asked.

“Yes, together with his oldest son, Craig, and his wife...” Bob replied, “and who would have thought, they live just down the road.

“Caitlin is his second child... and we already know where she lives. Finally, Jeremy is the youngest, and I managed to find his address. I hope I wasn’t too forward, Jupe, but I already called Craig Kopperschmidt.”

“Outstanding, Bob!” Jupe praised. “So?”

“His son Craig was on the phone. I told him we were interested in his father’s company for a school project. We can visit him tonight. He promised to tell us some things.”

“Great!” Jupe exclaimed. “Will Felix Kopperschmidt be there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we shall see, but we still have plenty of time before tonight,” Jupiter said. “We could deal with Jeremy until then. Do you have his number?”

“No, but his address. He lives not far from here as well.”

5. A Dance for the Sugar Plum Fairy

Jeremy Kopperschmidt lived just behind Rocky Beach inland in a small, pretty house with a view of the mountains. His garden was a blooming oasis in the middle of the yellow and brown dried-out countryside.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob parked their bikes at the fence and looked for a bell. There was none. After a short hesitation, Jupiter pushed open the garden gate and entered the property. He had just gone halfway to the front door when suddenly a deafening, tinny barking sounded from the right.

In shock, Jupiter looked to the right and expected to see a huge, snarling Doberman or Pit Bull racing towards him. There was actually a dog, but it didn't run towards him. It just stood there barking, and its body was strangely stiff. In fact, only its snout was moving.

Bob was the first one to notice. "This is not a real dog at all! It's... some kind of robot!"

"A Mobimec," said a voice from the left.

Jeremy stepped towards them from the other side of the garden, smiling. "One of the few that works electronically instead of mechanically. It would be a bit tedious to have to wind Pluto permanently."

"This Mobimec is called Pluto?" Pete asked astonished.

"So it is. He gets his energy from small solar cells on his back, and a motion detector makes him bark whenever anyone enters the property. This is his job, which he has done very reliably for years. Besides, he never sleeps and is guaranteed to be house-trained. Pluto, down," Jeremy shouted in the direction of the artificial dog, and immediately the Mobimec fell silent and sat down on its tinny hind legs, squeaking.

"Fascinating," Jupiter said. "So a microphone and voice recognition are also built in."

"So it is..." Jeremy said, "but now to you... I know you. You're the kid from the salvage yard, right? What brings you here?"

Jupiter introduced his friends and told them straight out why they had come. However, he did not mention the riddle that Jeremy had lost at the salvage yard.

"As you know, your sister came to us in search of your father's toys. However, you left yesterday in such a hurry that I didn't have the opportunity to tell you about a third collector who was also after old Mobimecs. I now suspect that he is your brother Craig."

It was difficult to discern a clear emotion in Jeremy Kopperschmidt's face. "So?"

"—So that made me curious. Three siblings searching for Mobimecs at the same time... We wanted to know what these Mobimecs and the Kopperschmidt Company are all about, so my friends and I started investigating."

"Investigating?"

Jupiter nodded and handed Jeremy one of their business cards. It said:



"I don't understand," Jeremy confessed. "Who hired you?"

"Nobody," Bob replied. "We are interested in unusual occurrences and secrets of all kinds... and there seems to be a secret about you, your siblings and the Mobimecs."

Jeremy still didn't seem to fully believe them. "So you're here out of curiosity?"

"That's right," Jupiter confirmed.

"And it can't be a coincidence that Caitlin or Craig sent you to spy on me?"

Jupiter shook his head. "But if I may be permitted an observation—your suspicion that we might be spying on you suggests that there really is a secret. Whatever it's about, The Three Investigators will be glad to help you."

Jeremy smiled tentatively. "All right. Maybe I could really use the help of some smart investigators... at least you found me. That couldn't have been easy... and as luck would have it, I was just thinking about the Scuttle Bug anyway. Come on!"

The Three Investigators followed Jeremy through the garden to the back of the house. There, they noticed that one wall was fixed with numerous pieces of plastic protrusions of different colours, positioned somewhat randomly from ground level to the roof of the two-storey house. Pete was familiar with this construction. It was an artificial rock climbing wall and the protrusions were climbing holds for the hands and feet.

"You're interested in rock climbing?" he asked Jeremy.

"Yes. Free climbing is my hobby."

They entered a sunny terrace, from which one had a great view into the canyon landscape. An elderly man with white hair sat at a white laid table in a comfortable looking garden chair. He had a stocky figure and with eyes closed, he let the sun shine into his tanned face. When the boys came closer, he blinked at them in surprise.

"May I introduce... Anthony Quinn... and this is Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews."

Pete had a laugh. "Anthony Quinn? The actor? No way! He's already dead."

"Yes, yes, thank goodness," replied the stranger, "not that I didn't like him... but since his death, I only have to explain to every other person that I'm not the Anthony Quinn, but just an Anthony Quinn. When I was born, the actor was 12 years old, and my mother could not have known what a curse this name would one day be on me." He laughed. "So you are friends of Jeremy?"

"No, sir," replied Jupiter. "We are—"

"They are investigators who figured out all by themselves that a secret might be hiding behind the Scuttle Bug," Jeremy explained.

"That's interesting," Mr Quinn marvelled, "which brings us straight to the point..."

"Have a seat, boys!" Jeremy said and offered The Three Investigators chairs. "So, let me get this straight. Craig was with you guys asking about Scuttle Bugs... and so did Caitlin. This is really enlightening." He turned to Mr Quinn. "What do you think about this, Anthony?"

“Quite clearly, if you ask me, your father is sending you a message—not just to you, but to all three of you.”

Jeremy nodded. “Yeah. That’s just like him. I got the Scuttle Bug, Caitlin got the corresponding key and Craig probably got the arms and legs... or the cave.”

Jupiter’s ears were wide open. “The cave?”

“Yeah. The little guy’s gotta crawl into something, right?”

“A Scuttle Bug is completely useless if you don’t have a cave for it,” Anthony Quinn clarified. “Only then do you know what it was really built for. Do you understand?”

The Three Investigators did not understand—at least not that well, anyway, but Jupiter decided to steer the conversation in a different, less bizarre direction for the time being.

“Why is your father sending you and your siblings all this stuff?” Jupe asked. “What did he say to that?”

“My father hasn’t said anything,” Jeremy replied, “because he has disappeared for several weeks without a trace.”

“Disappeared? Do you mean missing?” Jupe asked.

Again it was Mr Quinn who replied: “He’s been travelling a lot. I’m an old friend of Felix’s. Used to work for him building Mobimecs till my hands got too shaky. Since Felix quit the company, he has been living in his house with Craig and his wife, Martha Lynn. The last time I visited him a few weeks ago, he was packing his bags. Craig and Martha Lynn were not there.

“I asked him where he was going, but he wouldn’t tell me. He was terribly excited and was in a hurry. He just said that it was tremendously important and that he would be gone for a while. I was very worried, but he just wouldn’t come out with it. He just said that his children knew about it, but later I found out that he hadn’t told any of his children about a trip. Since then, no one has heard from him again.”

“I’ve been trying to track him down, but with no success,” Jeremy continued. “Just as I was about to call the police, a parcel arrived in the mail. It was the Scuttle Bug, all neatly wrapped up, but no note from Dad apart from the poem he had written on the wooden box basically saying that nothing will work until someone understands its meaning.”

Jupiter nodded. “I remember seeing the writing briefly.” He considered telling Jeremy about the longer riddle but decided to wait until he had the whole story.

“Are you sure there was nothing else in the box?” Mr Quinn asked.

Jeremy shook his head. “Just wood wool.”

“Where was the parcel posted?” Jupiter asked.

“The Los Angeles area.”

“So your father is still very close,” Pete noted.

“Not necessarily,” Jupiter objected. “Perhaps the package wasn’t actually from Felix Kopperschmidt.”

“It must be. Only my father is capable of making a Scuttle Bug... and this one is brand-new. So it must be his.”

“You think your father wants to tell you something with that Mobimec and the words on the box?” Jupe continued to probe.

“Yes.”

“And why in such a mysterious way?”

A smile crept onto Jeremy’s face, which slowly changed into a mischievous grin. “Would you like some tea?” he asked, instead of answering Jupiter’s question.

“Yes,” Jupiter replied, irritated. “With pleasure. Why not?”

Jeremy Kopperschmidt jumped up and hurried into the house.

“He’ll show you why Felix preferred the mysterious way,” Mr Quinn whispered and winked conspiratorially at The Three Investigators.

Before any of them could ask what he meant, Jeremy returned. He had brought three cups and poured them tea.

“Sugar?” he asked Bob.

He nodded.

“One spoonful or two?”

“Two.”

Jeremy reached for Bob’s cup and placed it in a small saucer in the brass tray that also held a sugar bowl. The tray was unusually thick. A second later, Bob found out why. There was a small brass button on the tray that he had not noticed earlier.

Jeremy pressed the button twice. Suddenly the lid of the sugar bowl opened as if by magic, and like a music box, music sounded from inside the tray. Bob recognized the piece—it was an excerpt from Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker*.

Amused, Bob reached for the little silver spoon but at that moment, it moved all by itself. It was attached to the rim of the sugar bowl with a ball joint. An unseen mechanism pushed the spoon into the sugar like a shovel. Then it scooped up the sugar, turned and tipped it into the cup. The process repeated for Bob’s second spoon of sugar.

After that, a hidden mechanism moved the saucer with the cup on it in an arc to the other side of the sugar bowl. It looked as if the cup was dancing to the music box music. The cross-shaped handle on the sugar bowl lid, which now pointed downwards, was extended on a tiny telescopic arm until it disappeared into the tea. Then it began to turn quietly humming, stirring the drink as it went.

After a few seconds the telescopic arm was retracted, the lid closed, the saucer and cup turned back in Bob’s direction with the music fading away.

For a moment, The Three Investigators were speechless.

Jeremy registered this with great satisfaction and said: “Allow me to introduce... the Sugar Plum Fairy... at your service.”

“That... that was great, Jeremy!” cried Bob. “How did you do that?”

“Not me. My father. He designed and built the Sugar Plum Fairy. I showed you this so you would understand what kind of person Dad is. Of course, the Sugar Plum Fairy is just a toy. It doesn’t make everyday life any easier... but that’s not why he ever cared. To my father, everything is a game. All he cares about is the fun you have with something—the excitement, the tension... the puzzles and riddles.

“For example, when we were little, we were never given our birthday presents just like that. We had to look for them first. My father hid them somewhere in the house and left little puzzles to lead us on the right track. He always made the presents himself, incredible inventions like my watchdog Pluto or the Sugar Plum Fairy here.”

Pete cleared his throat. “Speaking of which... could I have a spoonful of sugar?”

Jeremy smiled and set the Sugar Plum Fairy in motion a second time. To the sounds of Tchaikovsky’s music, The Three Investigators stared spellbound at the sophisticated sugar bowl.

“So when my father goes missing without a trace and then sends me an incomplete Scuttle Bug, then I would say, firstly, this is very typical of him, and secondly it means something. As Anthony said, the Scuttle Bug is a message to me... to us—my brother and sister and me.

“It’s obvious how to decipher it. We have to assemble the Scuttle Bug, find the cave and make the Bug crawl into it.”

“So what’s stopping you from contacting Craig and Caitlin and doing exactly that?” Jupiter asked.

Jeremy didn’t answer. Instead, Anthony Quinn uttered a bitter laugh. “That’s a really good question. It’s something I’ve been trying to get out of Jeremy for years in vain. So don’t bother.”

“You know the answer, Anthony,” Jeremy said angrily. “We’ve talked about it a dozen times.”

“Yeah, talk,” Mr Quinn said, “... about your late mother’s bequest—all the money Craig inherited; Caitlin’s and your anger about it; your sister’s greed... all those years of inheritance disputes between the three of you. We’ve talked a lot, you’re right, but what I don’t understand, Jeremy... what I don’t get is the whole story.

“Craig and Caitlin are your siblings, and you haven’t spoken to each other in years. You haven’t set foot in your parents’ house in years! I’m sorry, Jeremy, but I don’t understand that at all. Money is a really bad reason to throw up with your family. You should be glad you still have your siblings after your mum died so young.”

“You act as if it were all up to me!” Jeremy exclaimed.

“I know... it’s probably least of all because of you,” Quinn continued. “Fair enough, you’ve been trying to salvage the situation somehow for a long time. Craig and Caitlin are the ones who can’t forgive each other... and who still resent you for never taking sides... but if you’re honest, Jeremy, you’ve long since given up on improving the relationship between them. Maybe you should try again.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other in embarrassment. They didn’t understand everything that was said here but they sensed very clearly that a great burden lay on the Kopperschmidt family, and probably has for years. This explained why Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy treated each other like mortal enemies and avoided each other.

“Jeremy,” Jupiter said calmly. “I certainly cannot fully comprehend the situation between you and your siblings, but if your father has been missing for weeks and you are sure that the Mobimec he sent you is part of a message, don’t you think that the message could be very important? Maybe even vital? It could be a cry for help, for example.”

Jeremy nodded. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

“Then, for goodness’ sake, get in touch with your brother and sister and get on the trail of the message!” Mr Quinn urged.

“But... but I can’t! We haven’t spoken in years!”

“Then it is high time you did,” Jupiter insisted.

“Ha!” cried Mr Quinn. “I’ve been saying that for years!”

Jeremy sighed heavily. “But when? And how?”

“Right away,” Pete said, “and in the most direct way.”

Jupiter smiled. “Pete is our man for the rough—”

“Well, listen,” the Second Investigator interjected. “... I meant to say, be direct and frank. There are situations in which one must proceed cautiously and subtly, with tactics... and there are situations that are best dealt with as quickly and simply as possible. This situation belongs in the latter category. What I’m suggesting is to call your siblings and meet them right away... and in the most direct way.”

6. A Cave for the Scuttle Bug

In the end, it was not quite as easy as The Three Investigators had imagined.

Jeremy had convinced them that Caitlin wouldn't even open the door for him if he just showed up at her place. Craig might not be quite as violent but he would definitely resist. So The Three Investigators hatched a plan to bring the three siblings together without any forms of violence.

Mr Quinn was the only person who got along well with all three of Felix's children. He called Caitlin and suggested she pick him up for dinner that evening. He claimed to have news about her father. Then he told Craig the same thing and arranged a meeting with him that evening. Since The Three Investigators had an appointment with Craig anyway, they were supposed to stop him from slamming the door in his siblings' face.

"I'm curious to see if our plan will work," Bob said as they sat on their bikes that evening and headed for Craig's house.

"I have my doubts," said Pete. "As we saw, Caitlin can be a real spitfire. If this Craig guy is like that as well, they'll be scratching their eyes out."

The Kopperschmidts' parents' house was large and built of sooty dark stone and stood somewhat apart from the other houses in a breathtakingly colourful garden. Exotic-looking flowers were planted everywhere—their blossoms glowing in all imaginable colours in the evening sun.

At first sight, the house itself was not very unique or striking, but as The Three Investigators got closer, they discovered more and more small details that made the simple building a real Kopperschmidt house.

First was the mailbox by the side of the road. It was a normal semi-circular mailbox on a wooden stake—only that it wore a copper hat, its brim held by a mechanical hand, which in turn protruded from the box itself.

"Let me guess," muttered Pete. "If you put a letter inside..." He tried it out and opened the flap. Nothing happened but when he closed it, the mechanical hand moved and briefly lifted the hat. Pete smiled. "—Then the mailbox says thank you."

"Are you discovering the secrets of the Kopperschmidt house?" asked someone behind them.

The Three Investigators turned around. Jeremy had got out of his car and was walking towards them.

"Quite right," replied Jupiter.

"Well, there's plenty more," Jeremy promised and went to the garden gate. When he opened it, a soft chime sounded.

The Three Investigators looked around, but this time nothing was moving anywhere. When the gate fell back into the lock, a small metal man popped out of a thick hedge, clapped his hands, opened his grinning mouth and called out in a tinny voice: "Welcome!"

As quickly as he appeared, he disappeared again into the undergrowth.

Bob giggled. "Is this gonna go on forever?"

"Looks like it, Bob," Jupiter said, pointing to the house.

Small figures or robots made of metal were everywhere—copper goblins stood in the garden and scratched their heads squeakily. In the flower boxes in front of the windows, bizarre giant metal insects buzzed among themselves. Even the birds on the roof and in the trees were not real and gave out tinny chirps now and then.

Astonished, The Three Investigators wandered through the colourful garden, where there was purring and rattling from every corner. In front of the bright flowerbeds, small gardener Mobimecs with watering cans in their hands seemed to be just waiting to be activated so they could do their work.

In front of the stairs stood two statues of medieval knights in armour. The statues were blocking the way leading up to the entrance. Jeremy approached and stepped on a slab in the paved path that was protruding a little. With a rattling jerk, the two statues slid out of the way—one to the left and the other to the right, clearing the way up the stairs. The Three Investigators grinned.

Jeremy's pride, which he had not concealed during the presentation of Pluto and the Sugar Plum Fairy, seemed to have evaporated. He was obviously very nervous about meeting his brother, whom he had not seen for ages.

"How do we ring the doorbell?" asked Jupiter. "—Or is there even a doorbell?"

On the door, instead of a bell, there was only a door knocker, a heavy steel ring which was in the mouth of a lion. When Bob lifted the ring, the lion slightly opened its mouth and widened its eyes. When Bob dropped the ring, the lion sneezed briefly. Jeremy took a few steps back and hid halfway behind a bush planted next to the stairs.

It took a while... Then a woman with short, curly hair opened the door. She might have been in her mid-thirties, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and made a sporty impression.

"Hello! You must be the three guys interested in the Kopperschmidt Company, right? I'm Martha Lynn, Craig's wife."

Bob nodded and introduced himself and his friends. "I spoke to your husband on the phone this morning. It's really very nice of him to see us. There is, however, one more thing —"

This is as far as Bob got. For at that moment, Martha Lynn discovered her brother-in-law hidden behind the bushes.

"Jeremy!"

Jeremy put his index finger to his lips and whispered: "Is Craig in the house?"

"Yes, he is, but I don't know if..." Martha Lynn was surprised, but not angry.

"The thing about the school project was not quite the truth," Bob explained, embarrassed, and in a low voice. "To tell you the truth, it was just an excuse. We have something to say to your husband. Would you please let us in so we can talk to him?"

Martha Lynn hesitated for only a brief moment, then willingly stepped aside and let The Three Investigators enter. "I don't quite understand what's going on but... go ahead."

They were in a spacious but a little too gloomy entrance hall. The First Investigator took a few steps forward, apparently getting too close to the cloakroom.

Suddenly a squeaking metal hand stretched out to him, which would have wanted to take his coat off if he had one. Jupiter laughed uncertainly and looked around further. Immediately he noticed a ledge that ran along the wall across the room at about shoulder height. It didn't end at the door frame, but disappeared into semicircular holes in the wall, only to reappear on the other side of the wall. Jupiter couldn't make any sense of it, but he was sure that this too was one of Felix Kopperschmidt's creations.

"Come along," Martha Lynn said and led them through a wooden double door into a spacious living room with high windows, behind which lay the garden. Here too, the strange

ledge stretched across the room and disappeared back into the wall. Jeremy did not enter the room but stood behind the door.

Craig Kopperschmidt sat in a massive leather armchair and was reading a thick book. The book lay on a hand, which only at second glance, did not belong to Craig but protruded from a rod that was attached to the left side of the armchair.

When The Three Investigators entered, Craig was pressing a small button on the armrest. Another hand came buzzing up, lay down on the book, turned the page and retracted.

Then Craig noticed the visitors. He closed the book—an old-looking book on a religious subject. The metal arm automatically swung to the side and folded up on the side of the chair. Craig stood up.

“Ah, the three boys with the school project, I suppose. How nice. Come in, come in! I must warn you though, I don’t have much time for you. I’m going to have visitors in the next few minutes, but I’m sure there’ll be enough time for a few questions.”

“Thank you very much, Mr Kopperschmidt,” Bob said, introducing his colleagues once again.

“You can call me Craig,” Mr Kopperschmidt said. “So what can I do for you? What would you like to know?”

“Things are a little different than you think,” Jupiter now spoke up. “I am the nephew of Titus Jones, the owner of The Jones Salvage Yard. You were at my uncle’s place the day before yesterday, asking about Mobimecs.”

“Right! What a coincidence.”

But the First Investigator shook his head. “It’s no coincidence. To be honest, that’s the reason for our visit. We’re investigating a case involving your father and the Mobimecs.”

“Investigate? What do you mean investigate?” Craig asked.

Jupiter told in short words about their investigation business. Craig didn’t seem to believe him, but asked further: “And on whose behalf are you... investigating?”

“On our own. We found out that there’s a message hidden behind the Scuttle Bug parts your father sent to you and your siblings and—”

“How do you know all this?” Craig interrupted him harshly. In the meantime, every friendliness had disappeared from his voice.

“From me, Craig,” Jeremy said and came through the door.

At that moment, Craig took a step back. “What are you doing here?” Then he turned to his wife and said: “This guy has no business here!”

“Craig,” Jeremy began in a soft voice. “Let’s talk to each other sensibly.”

“I don’t know what we have to talk about. Lynnie, why did you even let him in?”

“You know my opinion on this,” Martha Lynn said defiantly.

Then there was a knock at the door and the lion’s soft sneeze could be heard. “That will be Anthony,” Martha Lynn said. “I’ll let him in.”

She left the room and came back a short time later—with Anthony Quinn in the entourage... and Caitlin and George.

“Are you out of your mind?” Caitlin hissed at Anthony Quinn. “They are here after all! Both of them!”

“I’m sorry, Caitlin, but I was forced to tell a little white lie to get you to come here,” explained Mr Quinn.

“And what are these three little rats doing here? I’m going to leave immediately,” she explained icily and turned to leave.

“Please, Caitlin, stay,” Jeremy said. “At least listen to what—”

“Could someone please explain to me what all this means?” Craig burst out, staring alternately at Mr Quinn and The Three Investigators.

“Very much so,” Jupiter replied and began to tell in calm words what exactly had happened and what plan they had made that afternoon.

All the while, Caitlin had her back on them with her arms crossed with George at her side. Craig stared intently at Jupiter, as if trying to prevent accidentally catching his siblings’ gaze at any cost.

“So we believe that your missing father is trying to send you a message...” Jupe said, “to all of you—a message that you can only decipher if you work together. Therefore, there are only two options—either you set the Mobimec in motion together, or you don’t do it and will never find out what your father wants to tell you... even if it may be vital. It’s your choice.”

Jupiter remained silent and waited. None of them moved.

Then Caitlin said: “George, tell them both there’s no way I’m giving up the key.”

George, her friend in the black designer suit, repeated: “There’s no way Caitlin’s going to give up the key.”

“Typical,” hissed Craig. “She’s always been selfish and greedy.”

Caitlin spun around. “You only know how to talk, you...” She paused and turned to George. “George, tell him that he should not say such things in the presence of outsiders...”

“Caitlin feels that’s you should not say such things in the presence of outsiders...”

Martha Lynn gave a resigned sigh. “I’m gonna get something to drink.” She disappeared into the next room.

No one spoke.

Bob gave Jupiter a questioning look but the First Investigator only shook his head. They had done what they could. The Kopperschmidt family had to figure out the rest between themselves.

Suddenly a rattling noise approached, and out of the hole in the wall chugged a toy locomotive that pulled three wagons behind it. It rode along the ledge, and only now did Jupiter discover that there were little rails laid there that led through the whole room—and apparently through the other rooms as well. On the three wagons stood a few glasses of drink. With a short whistle, the locomotive came to a halt.

The Three Investigators enthusiastically approached the train.

“What is this?” Pete asked.

“The Home Express,” explained Mr Quinn. “It runs throughout the house. Felix built it for the kids back in the day. In every room, there is a small control panel, with which you can set where you want the train to go. When Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy were little, they used to send little messages to each other... and candy. Remember?”

The three siblings nodded. Their anger seemed to have suddenly disappeared. Caitlin pressed her lips together and wiped her hand over her eyes.

Nobody touched the drinks.

Then Jeremy suddenly reached into his pocket, took out the torso of the Scuttle Bug and put it on the table.

Craig left the room. The Three Investigators feared that he would not return, but then he came back, holding six small metal objects in his hand—the limbs that would fit into the Bug. With a few practised moves, he fixed the arms and legs into the body. The completed Scuttle Bug looked as if it was about to start moving at any moment.

Craig and Jeremy looked over at Caitlin, who still had her back turned.

Caitlin visibly wrestled with herself, and for a moment it looked as if she wanted to leave the house without comment.

“Caitlin, we can just go if you want to,” George said.

“Don’t interfere!” she hissed angrily—and pulled the heptagonal key from her pocket. She pressed it into George’s hand and nodded at him. George went up and put the key on the table.

For a moment, everyone looked silently at the Mobimec.

Then Mr Quinn said: “Now there’s only one problem left—the cave. Without the cave, a Scuttle Bug has nowhere to return to, as we know.”

“I think we can help there,” Jupiter said and opened his backpack. Carefully he took out the white miniature mountain and triumphantly placed it on the table next to the Scuttle Bug.

“Where... where did you get this—” Anthony Quinn began, stunned.

“I’ll tell you the story some other time,” Jupiter announced, reluctant to admit in front of the group that he had had kept the riddle from Jeremy the whole time. “To put it in a nutshell, we’ve been doing our investigation work and tracked down the cave for the Scuttle Bug. If I understand correctly, the Mobimec will crawl into the cave and solve the mystery. If no one objects, I, as a neutral person, will activate the Scuttle Bug,” Jupiter suggested.

“You?” cried Caitlin. “Absolutely not!”

Jeremy cleared his throat. “I honestly think it would be a good idea if an outsider took over.”

“Typical,” Caitlin hissed and turned back.

Jeremy gave Jupiter a nod of encouragement.

“Is there anything specific I need to know?” Jupe asked.

Jeremy shook his head. “Just wind it up and put it in front of the cave entrance. The rest will happen by itself.”

The First Investigator nodded and took the Mobimec in one hand and the key in the other. Then he stuck it in the keyhole at the back of the Bug and began to turn.

7. A Message for the Kopperschmidts

When the spring inside the Mobimec was wound, Jupiter carefully placed it in front of the entrance of the plastic mountain. Immediately, the Scuttle Bug started buzzing and crawled forward to the cave opening... and then it went inside.

"Now what?" Pete asked. "We can't see what it's doing."

"Just you wait," Jeremy whispered.

Suddenly a small light bulb flashed up inside the cave, and the milky plastic suddenly became transparent. Now everyone could see exactly what the Scuttle Bug was doing.

It had crawled up to a small bookshelf at the back of the cave. There, it stretched its front arms up and hit a tiny mechanism. Suddenly, a miniature book popped out and the Scuttle Bug grabbed it. Then it turned around and crawled back out. As it was coming out of the cave, the light switched off and it was dark inside again. The next moment, the Bug was out of the cave and continued crawling until Jupiter caught it before it fell over the edge of the table.

The First Investigator put the Bug further into the table and it continued to crawl for a while until the spring had run out and it stopped.

"Impressive," Jupiter said and took the tiny book out of the little tinny creature's hand. "I assume your father's message is in this book."

Jupiter hand it to Jeremy, but he shook his head. "I would prefer if you would take on this task as well."

Craig also nodded at him. Caitlin, however, stared at the First Investigator with clenched teeth but said nothing.

Jupiter ignored her rejection and held the little book close to his eyes. It was no larger than a stamp, but so lovingly designed that it actually looked like the shrunken version of a thick, leather-bound tome. Jupiter opened it.

The writing was tiny, and he could barely decipher it. There were only a few words on each page, so the First Investigator had to constantly turn the pages with pointed fingers while reading the text aloud:

*It was quite a long time ago,
I created a masterpiece.
Something that gives me so much joy,
That I believe would never cease.*

*In recent times, dark clouds appeared,
Since then, I have been under siege.
The greatest enemy I've known,
Will soon destroy my masterpiece.*

*Something so wonderful will end,
But you three can still save the day.
Ask the Black Lady for advice,
And she will help show you the way.*

Jupiter closed the tiny book in confusion. He wasn't sure if he had understood everything.

When he looked up, he half expected to see amused, angry or disappointed faces but Craig and Jeremy's eyes showed deep dismay.

Craig let himself fall onto his heavy armchair which caused the book Mobimec to automatically extend the mechanical hand to offer him his book for reading. Jeremy stood there as if frozen stiff, and Caitlin looked at her brothers straight in the eyes for the first time as she clung to George's arm.

"It can't be," she whispered. "It's all true! This... that's..."

"It's a disaster," Jeremy said. "What are we gonna do?"

No one answered.

Jupiter looked at his friends questioningly but they were as perplexed as he was... nor did Martha Lynn, George and Mr Quinn seem to have the slightest idea what it was all about.

"What's the matter, Craig?" Martha Lynn finally asked. "What does this message mean?"

"It means Dad's even more brilliant than we previously imagined..." Craig said, "and that he's in danger now."

"He used to tell us a story many times about his masterpiece," Jeremy continued. "It was something infinitely valuable he once created and has guarded like the light of his life ever since. Of course, we kids always wanted to know what exactly this device was, whether it was a Mobimec or something else... but he never told us. 'Later,' he always said, 'when you're older.' However, as we grew up, we no longer believed in his legendary masterpiece, of course. We thought it was just a story he made up for us kids—a fairy tale... but now..."

"Now it seems as if this masterpiece really exists," Jupiter added. "It is hidden somewhere and someone is planning to destroy it. Do you have any idea what or where it might be?"

Jeremy shook his head silently.

"It's immensely precious," Craig finally said. "That's the only thing he kept emphasizing."

"What enemy could this be that your father speaks of? What about the 'Black Lady'? Who could he mean by that?"

Caitlin turned around. "I've had enough of this. I want you three rascals out of here! This is none of your damn business! Go back to your junkyard!"

Craig was much calmer, but no less determined when he said: "Caitlin is right. We thank you for your help... but this is a family matter. You should leave right now!"

Then he turned to Mr Quinn and George and said: "All of you."

"George stays," Caitlin insisted.

"No, Caitlin," Craig insisted. "This is just between us."

"What about Martha Lynn?" Caitlin questioned. "She's not family."

"She is my wife," Craig replied.

"Ha! That doesn't mean anything," Caitlin argued. "If George goes, Martha Lynn goes!"

Craig wrestled with himself, then he said to his wife: "Lynn, would you mind..."

"Of course not," Martha Lynn said. "Just talk about whatever you have to talk about! I'll take our guests outside."

Two minutes later, The Three Investigators walked through the Kopperschmidts' garden to the street with Anthony Quinn, George and Martha Lynn.

“And you also have no idea what this strange message means?” Jupiter asked Craig’s wife.

She shook her head. “—And I think it’s better that way.”

“Aren’t you even curious?” Jupe continued to probe.

“No, and neither should you be. I’ve never seen Craig like this. He has his reasons for not telling us more.”

“It sounded so mysterious,” Jupiter muttered, “and I can hardly resist secrets. I would really like to know—”

“Weren’t you listening, boy?” George suddenly hissed. “It’s none of your business! Go home and do a crossword puzzle!”

Pete and Jupiter wanted to reply at the same time but Mr Quinn beat them to it. “It’s all right, boys. You’ve done all you can do... but everything else is out of your hands now. I’m gonna go home now and let things take their course... and so should you.”

“Let things take their course?” growled Jupiter when they were back at Headquarters half an hour later. “This is just a polite way of telling us that we’re out. I can’t believe it! We were so good at it! We solved the mystery, we brought the Kopperschmidt family together, and then we just get thrown out of the house and out of the case.”

“We’ll survive,” Pete said, but he had to pull himself together not to show his relief too clearly.

“What if we do go on?” Jupiter thought aloud.

“On our own?” Pete remarked.

“Jupe!” Bob said admonishingly. “The Kopperschmidts were clearly against it! That would not be okay.”

The First Investigator sighed. “You’re right.”

At that second, the phone rang. Jupiter turned on the loudspeaker and answered the call. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Hello Jupiter?” said a soft voice. “This is Jeremy.”

“Jeremy! This is a surprise. We never thought we’d hear from you again. Is the family meeting over yet?”

“No. It’s in full swing,” Jeremy whispered. Then he seemed to hold the phone in another direction.

The Three Investigators heard an agitated babble of voices. Craig and Caitlin were clearly heard. The Three Investigators couldn’t make out exactly what it was all about, but one thing was clear—they were arguing violently.

“I’m still at the house,” Jeremy continued. “Listen, I don’t have much time. The others don’t know I’m calling you. I’m sorry Craig kicked you out. It wasn’t my idea. I just want to ask you to keep up the good work. You’ve found the cave of the Scuttle Bug, so maybe you’ll manage to solve the rest of the mystery as well—that is, of course, if you still want to...”

“Of course we do!” Jupiter said quickly. “—But I thought that from now on, this is a family matter. Why do you have a different opinion from your siblings, if I may ask?”

“Because I know Craig and Caitlin won’t be able to have a rational conversation, let alone work together. I don’t think we can help my father without your support, but the others don’t need to know that.”

“All right, Jeremy, we’ll help you, but it would be good if we could learn a little more about your father’s hidden masterpiece.”

“I don’t know myself,” Jeremy confessed. Then, in a lowered voice, he said: “I think someone is coming. I have to go now. Ask the Black Lady.”

“But who is that—” Jupiter began, but by then Jeremy had already hung up.

The First Investigator turned to his friends. A grin crept across his face. “Well, fellas. I’d say we’re back in the case!”

8. A Task for the Black Lady

“Well, guess what, fellas...” Bob cried as he entered Headquarters the next afternoon.

“You found out something?” Jupiter asked curiously.

“I sure did. I was at the newspaper archives. There are some small articles about the Kopperschmidt Company. One was about the company’s anniversary, and there was a photo of all the employees at that time. Under the picture were the names. I noted them and managed to contact some of them.”

“And?”

“In no time at all, I reached five former Kopperschmidt employees. With a little patience, we might be able to get the others, but that might not be necessary.”

“Why not? Do you know everything yet?”

Bob shook his head. “—But a trend was emerging... Absolutely nobody could tell me anything about Kopperschmidt’s masterpiece. Some found some of his toys more successful than others, but as to the masterpiece, the one that surpasses all others, nobody could tell me anything about it... at least there was never any talk of it at the Kopperschmidt Company.”

Jupiter was disappointed. He had hoped for more. “Is there any good news?”

Bob nodded eagerly. “Everyone I called knew who the Black Lady was.”

“Aha! Who is she?”

“She’s the former secretary and accountant of Felix Kopperschmidt. Her name is Virginia Loughlin. She was like the good soul of the company, taking care of everything and everybody. She was always called the ‘Black Lady’ because of her favourite clothes.”

“And you probably already know where she lives,” Pete surmised.

“Of course!” Bob quipped. “—In Brentwood.”

“Great job, Bob!” Jupiter’s disappointment was gone. “That was excellent work. Well, let’s not waste any time. The Black Lady is waiting!”

Virginia Loughlin lived in a small apartment on the outskirts of Brentwood, just outside Santa Monica. When The Three Investigators arrived at her door, she opened it just a gap. She had placed a security chain inside the door. The Three Investigators only saw half of her face.

“Yes?”

“Good afternoon, we are The Three Investigators,” said Jupiter. “Are you Virginia Loughlin?”

“I am. What’s this about?”

“About Felix Kopperschmidt. You used to work for him and—”

“That’s something,” said Mrs Loughlin, stunned.

She closed the door, removed the security chain and opened the door completely. It was immediately clear why everyone knew her as the ‘Black Lady’. Not only was she dressed entirely in black, but her hair was raven black and only in a few places was it streaked with silver and white. Her face had something distinguished, almost aristocratic. A black Persian cat snuggled closely to her legs and purred.

“You’re not the first people to come to me today about Felix.”

“Really?” Jupiter asked. “Then I suppose his three children have already been here?”

“Two of them,” Mrs Loughlin said. “Craig and Jeremy... but how are you involved in this?”

“May we come in, ma’am?” Jupiter asked. “Then we can tell you the story.”

Mrs Loughlin didn’t hesitate. The Three Investigators entered her apartment and took a seat in the living room.

Pete immediately noticed a small metal figure standing on a desk. Under one arm it carried a box, the other one it held out with an open hand. In its back was a key.

“A Mobimec?” he asked.

“Yes. Felix gave it to me when I left the company,” Mrs Loughlin said. “That’s the tip of the iceberg. It’s basically nothing more than a pencil sharpener... but a very cute one. Felix made it especially for me... but now tell me why you’re here.”

Jupiter reported how The Three Investigators had come across the Kopperschmidt case and what had happened the previous evening. He didn’t conceal anything because he assumed that Mrs Loughlin already knew everything. In fact, most of the time she nodded and asked no questions.

“All right,” she finally said. “What I just didn’t understand is why are you concerned with this story? And what do you want from me?”

“At first, it was only curiosity that drove us,” Jupiter confessed. “We were fascinated by Felix Kopperschmidt and his work, but since yesterday we have a client. Jeremy asked us to come and see you and to pursue the matter further. You seem to be the key to the secret behind Felix Kopperschmidt’s masterpiece. That’s why we’re here.”

“Hmm...” The Black Lady thoughtfully put her index finger to her lips. Apparently she was undecided whether or not to provide The Three Investigators with the information she had. “You know that none of this really concerns you, right?”

“We know it’s a family matter,” Jupiter evaded the question, “but experience has taught us that a neutral party can sometimes achieve more because internal family conflicts that obviously exist among the Kopperschmidts provide unnecessary obstacles.”

The Black Lady nodded and absent-mindedly stroked her cat which had curled up next to her on the sofa. She was lost in thoughts for a while but finally, she said: “Perhaps you are right. All right, then. I will tell you the story of Felix Kopperschmidt and his masterpiece.”

She paused again for a while, before she began her story: “Felix and I have always had a close friendship. He trusted me when it came to the company, and among other things too. One day, he let me in on a secret...”

“‘Virginia,’ he said, ‘I have a favour to ask of you. It’s incredibly important. Perhaps the day will come when I might disappear from sight... from everything...’ Of course, I wanted to know what he meant by that, but he didn’t want to go into detail. He just said it had something to do with his masterpiece—that he had to protect it at all costs... and that he might need my help to do so one day.

“‘There are only three people who can really help me in an emergency—my children,’ he said. ‘So I want you to do me a favour, Virginia. If one day I should disappear without a trace, send these three packages to my children.’”

“Those were probably the packages Mr Kopperschmidt had put the Scuttle Bug, the limbs, and the key in,” Bob said.

“Right. They were in my possession for years, and I have never forgotten my duty. Felix and I were always in contact—until his children called me a few weeks ago to tell me that he had disappeared without trace. That was my signal, so I sent out the packages.”

“So far, so good,” Jupiter said, “but what is it really about? What has Felix Kopperschmidt created that is so ground-breaking? Who else knows about it? And why would it be destroyed? And by whom?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that,” Mrs Loughlin replied.

Jupiter could not escape the strange undertone in her voice. “—Because you don’t know, or because you can’t tell us?” he asked.

“Both,” she replied mysteriously. “I don’t know everything... and what I know is not for everyone to know.”

“But Mr Kopperschmidt may be in great danger,” Jupiter said.

Strangely enough, the Black Lady smiled. “You take your investigation work very seriously, don’t you?”

“It’s not a game,” Jupiter said, “at least in the rarest of cases. We rather be a little over-cautious instead of taking things lightly.”

Mrs Loughlin nodded. “A wise attitude to life. You just have to be careful not to lose all the fun and lightness of it.”

“Thank you for the tip, but am I correct in assuming that you are trying to distract us from the subject, Mrs Loughlin?” Jupiter asked.

“Not at all... unless we’re talking about different things.”

“I’m talking about Felix Kopperschmidt and that he may be in trouble.”

“And what are you going to do about it?” the lady asked.

“Well, we want to save him!” Pete now interjected. “—And if you know something that could help us, you have to let us know!”

Again the Black Lady was silent for a long time. “I know something... or rather, a clue is in my possession... but it is not really meant for you.”

“So it is for the three siblings,” Jupiter surmised, “but only two of whom were with you today.”

“That’s right. Felix had a second task for me. First, he wanted me to send the packages... then I was to give something to Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy.”

“Another Mobimec?” Jupiter asked.

“Right, however, it was important to Felix that all three be present. They weren’t today. Caitlin was not here.”

“Do you know why?” Bob asked.

“They had a terrible argument yesterday. Caitlin preferred not to see her brothers again today.”

“So you didn’t give them the Mobimec.”

“Exactly. It’s still here with me... and I wonder...” She fell silent.

“What?” Jupiter asked lurkingly.

“As I told you, Felix did say that only three people could help him in an emergency,” Mrs Loughlin said, “but now, his children don’t...” She sighed. “I wonder perhaps you three could be of help here...”

“Really?” Pete remarked.

Mrs Loughlin continued: “When Felix mentioned ‘three people’, it was probably because he had his three children in mind... However, it is also possible that he meant that three people could achieve something whereas two would fail.”

“I’m not sure,” mumbled Jupiter, “but I had the impression that his children already play a big part in the whole thing.”

“You’re absolutely right, Jupiter,” Mrs Loughlin agreed. “As we can see, his children cannot help him. They are at odds with each other... so now I’m going to do something that

may be a big mistake... or just the right thing..." She paused for a moment and then said: "I will give you the Mobimec."

The Three Investigators were speechless. None of them expected that.

Virginia Loughlin got up and went into the next room. When she came back, she held a cube-shaped box with the Kopperschmidt logo in her hands. She handed it to the First Investigator.

"This is the Boy Scout," she said.

Jupiter accepted the box without opening it. "What is he supposed to do?"

She smiled. "He will reveal the next path that you need to take. This is the only thing I can tell you... and to answer your next question right away, Jupiter, it's the only other thing I know."

"Well... thank you very much," Jupiter said.

"Don't thank me. I have no idea if I'm doing the right thing, but you three seem like smart guys. Maybe you can do what Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy can't do together."

9. A Threat for the Investigators

During their visit to Mrs Loughlin, dark clouds had gathered. The air smelled like rain. The Three Investigators hurried home.

They were very quiet on the way. Mrs Loughlin had left a lasting impression on them, and Jupiter couldn't shake the feeling that half the time, she had been talking about something quite different from what The Three Investigators thought.

As they drove past the red tower that Pete had climbed two days ago, Bob broke the silence. "One thing I don't understand..."

"Just one?" Pete asked. "I am impressed. There's a lot I don't understand."

"One thing I especially don't understand is why Felix Kopperschmidt is running this game of hide-and-seek? Why doesn't he tell his former secretary or his children directly what it's all about? What masterpiece are we talking about, and who is his enemy?"

"I suppose he wanted to prevent this information from falling into the wrong hands," Jupiter said. "Only someone who has been involved in the wonderful world of Mobimecs should be able to solve the mystery. This is probably directly related to his masterpiece, but we won't know all that for sure until we solve the mystery."

Jupiter had still not opened the box they had received from Mrs Loughlin, but he could hardly wait and the inner tension made him pedal faster than ever before.

They made it just in time before the rain started. No sooner had they entered Headquarters than the drops began to splash onto the roof.

"Well, now!" Pete said impatiently. "Open that box, Juve, or I'll burst with curiosity."

"I'd like to see it too," the First Investigator replied calmly and with great effort, but he hardly managed to hide his own excitement. This was exactly to his taste—a mysterious box... in fact, any mystery.

Was it another task they had to do? What might be behind it? What was the secret of the toy maker?

Jupiter loosened the parcel tape with which the box was tied and opened the lid. Carefully wrapped in wood wool, there lay a small figure not unlike the Scuttle Bug. This was the Boy Scout. On his back, there was a heptagonal keyhole. Arms and legs had a similarly fine mechanism as the Scuttle Bug, only that this toy was not supposed to crawl around. He just stood there.

Another big difference were the eyes. The Boy Scout had two huge plastic discs as eyes, which gave the face a funny haunting expression. It made him look a bit like a horrified character from a Saturday morning cartoon show.

Jupiter suspected that the eyes lit up as soon as the Mobimec was set in motion.

"I can't wait to see what he does when he's in action," Pete said. "Is the key in the box?"

Bob was already rummaging through the wood wool. A moment later, he was triumphantly holding the key in his hand. "Here you go."

Jupiter accepted it, put it into the keyhole and carefully wound it. Then he placed the Mobimec on the desk top. Immediately the Boy Scout started to move.

Rattling, he bent over slightly, raised his right arm and shielded his huge eyes. Then he turned his head slightly back and forth as if he was looking for something. After a while, his

legs started to move too. Tripping, he made a turn of ninety degrees and looked again into the distance as if searching for something.

“What is he doing?” Pete asked.

“He is looking for the path,” Bob interpreted the movement of the toy. “After all, he is a boy scout.”

The Mobimec continued its search—every few seconds, it turned another ninety degrees until it appeared to have searched all around Headquarters. Little by little, his movements slowed down until the key in his back finally stopped turning. The figure straightened up again and his arm went limp. Then the Boy Scout stood as still and motionless as in the beginning.

“Great,” Pete said. Bob and Jupiter looked at him questioningly. “No, really, I think this Kopperschmidt toy is really great, but where does that leave us? Are we any smarter now?”

Jupiter shook his head and wound the Mobimec up a second time. Again the Boy Scout looked out for something and turned on his own axis. The Three Investigators watched him with fascination. At the end, once again they were as perplexed as before.

“I hate to say it,” Jupiter began, “but it’s a mystery to me how the Boy Scout is supposed to help us.”

“It almost seems as if we need another part, as in the Scuttle Bug—a missing part,” Bob pondered.

“It’s possible, but there is no riddle in the box...” Jupe wondered, “so where would we find the missing part?”

Before anyone could answer, a rattling noise drew the attention of The Three Investigators to the main gate of the salvage yard. They looked out of the window into the pouring rain.

The yard was deserted. Because of the bad weather, Aunt Mathilda had already closed the main gate ten minutes before the usual closing time. Experience had shown that when it rained, nobody wanted to rummage in the junk.

However today, Mathilda Jones seemed to have been wrong. On the other side of the gate stood two figures, which were only vaguely recognizable.

“Someone wants to buy something,” Pete said. “They are persistent, even when they can see that the gate is closed.”

“I don’t think they are customers,” muttered Jupiter, suddenly gripped by a certain hunch. He reached for his jacket and stumbled out into the rain. Bob and Pete followed him curiously.

“Caitlin!” Jupiter cried when he recognized the woman at the gate. Standing beside her was her friend George. Both looked at him grimly. “What a surprise! I didn’t think we’d meet again so soon.”

“Save your speeches, Jupiter!” she quipped. “I was just with Virginia. She told me that you visited her... and that she gave you something that was intended for me. I want it back!”

“Wait a minute!” Jupiter curbed her zeal. “Intended for you? Mrs Loughlin presented the matter somewhat differently to us.”

“I don’t care what she said to you! Whatever she gave you, it belongs to my father and you have no business with it!”

“Mrs Loughlin has received an assignment from your father,” Jupiter objected. “When she gave us the item you allude to, she was acting only on his behalf.”

“Listen, boy,” George has now spoken. “We are not here to argue! Give us that thing back, and make it snappy!”

“Excuse me, sir,” Jupiter replied, laboriously restrained, “we will only act in consultation with Mrs Loughlin since she was the one who gave us this task. Now if you’ll excuse us, we have work to do.” He turned to leave.

“Stop!” yelled Caitlin. She was so furious that Jupiter actually changed his mind and returned to the gate. “If you don’t return my property immediately, I will report you!”

“Do what you have to do,” Jupiter said.

“You’re in big trouble, boy,” George threatened.

“Whatever you say.” Jupiter was not to be intimidated.

Caitlin started to respond, but then remained obstinately silent. Finally, she turned around in a rage. “Come on, George!” she hissed and went back to her car.

There she turned and shouted: “You’ll regret this!”

She got in, barely waited for George to close the passenger door, and started the engine. The headlights flashed and blinded Jupiter so much that he had to put his hand in front of his eyes. Then the car turned and sped away.

“Geez, she was really annoyed,” Pete remarked.

“If she hadn’t been so gruff, Jupe might have been talked into it,” said Bob. “Wouldn’t you, Jupe?”

The First Investigator did not respond. He was still looking at Caitlin’s car. Then he turned around and rushed back to Headquarters.

“Hey, Jupe! What’s going on?” Pete exclaimed.

“I have an idea!” Jupiter cried back over his shoulder.

10. A Lamp for the Boy Scout

Bob and Pete only found out more when they were back at Headquarters and stared expectantly at the First Investigator.

“What idea?” Bob wanted to know.

“It occurred to me when the headlights of Caitlin’s car blinded me,” said Jupiter, tapping the Boy Scout’s face. “The eyes. They are huge plastic discs. Don’t you find that very noticeable? Don’t they look as if they were designed for something specific? At first, I thought they would light up or blink when you wind the Mobimec, but they didn’t...”

“So what?” Pete wondered.

“Wouldn’t it be possible that they are sensors? Sensors that respond to something?” Jupe asked.

“Respond to something?” Pete repeated. “Like what?”

“It could be that the Boy Scout must see something specific in order to reveal his secret. After all, he is searching.”

“You... you mean that this toy can actually see?” Bob asked, fascinated.

“No, of course not, but I think it is technically quite feasible for the eyes to react to a certain colour, for example... or to brightness... or movement.”

“If you think—” Bob began.

“It’s definitely worth a try,” Jupiter said and eagerly wound the Mobimec one more time.

Again the little figure was looking for something while turning, but this time, Jupiter waved around in front of his big eyes. Nothing happened. Then the First Investigator pulled the desk lamp towards him, pointed it at the Mobimec and turned it on.

The scout suddenly pulled up his left arm and covered his face with both hands as if he was blinded. At the same time, his upper body twitched back. This threw him off balance and he tilted backwards and fell on his back. When he hit his back, a small, hidden flap in his head popped open and a tiny bird shot out, bobbing back and forth on a spring and chirping once briefly. Then the Mobimec remained motionless, only the bird wobbled a little.

The Three Investigators burst out laughing.

“That was about the wackiest thing I’ve ever seen,” Pete giggled. “Do that again!”

However, Jupiter put on a serious look. “I admit I’m amused too, but we should now focus on what’s important.”

He took the Boy Scout and examined him. In the opening where the bird had come out, there was a little note. “Here it is.”

“Jupe, you’re a genius,” Pete said.

“I know.” The First Investigator unfolded the hidden note. In the tiny handwriting of Felix Kopperschmidt that he was already familiar with, it said:

*It was a very long time ago,
A bold young man travelled out to sea.
Set off from Carthage, onward to Rome,
To seek new ventures, and to be free.*

*His pious mother was not happy,
That her son had left and gone astray.
Soon, the son went from Rome to Milan,
The mother followed him all the way.*

*The mother had only one wish,
That her son return to their faith.
She wept, hoped and prayed on sore knees,
But she knew she would have to wait.*

*The man went through a crisis,
And struggled with his conscience.
After a search for the truth,
He returned to reverence.*

*Eventually, the son was baptized,
That was answer to his mother's pleas.
He became a famous holy man,
Who wrote books and preached philosophies.*

*Both mother and son were made saints,
As their virtues were much acclaimed.
A city close to the angels,
After the mother, it was named.*

*There is an old church by the sea,
That carries the name of the son.
Take a look at the night candles,
To find something that you will want.*

"Wow," Pete remarked after Jupiter read the text. "That's really a great story. Only it doesn't tell me anything."

"Well," Jupiter murmured and pinched his lower lip as he went over the text again. "To be honest, I am not sure what this means either. It's about a church, that much seems clear. A church named after the son in this story—a saint."

"Unfortunately, pretty much all churches are named after saints—a good many, anyway," Bob interjected. "How are we supposed to know which one?"

"By finding out who this poem is about," said Jupiter, turning to Bob. "Mother and son—both canonized. Do you have any ideas?"

"Me? Why me? You're the genius here."

"I mean an idea how we can find out."

"Well," mumbled Bob. "There are books on saints—encyclopedias. I think I even saw one here at the salvage yard the other day."

"Really?"

Bob nodded.

Jupiter stood up and looked at his friends in a challenging way. "Come on!"

"Are we going to look for that book now?" Pete asked.

"Do you know how many books are here?" Jupe asked.

"I'm guessing about five hundred million..." Pete said.

"Then it is all the more important that you help us find it," Jupe demanded.

Five minutes later, The Three Investigators were squatting between the bookcases and boxes, which were housed rainproof under a corrugated iron roof, and rummaging through the volumes.

“What does this encyclopedia look like, Bob?” Pete asked.

“Like a book,” Bob replied, “with many pages between two covers.”

“Very funny.”

It took another half hour before Bob finally yelled ‘Eureka!’ and held a thick, dusty old volume in his hands. “Here it is. You see, Pete—many pages between two covers. So I wasn’t mistaken.”

Hurriedly they returned to Headquarters and took a closer look at the book.

“Looks a bit like the book Craig was reading when we visited him,” Bob noticed and started leafing through it, but after just a few pages, he let it sink in frustration.

“What is it, Bob?” Pete asked.

“There are hundreds of saints described in this book! Probably thousands! I had no idea there were so many! Abel, Abraham, Achatius, Achilleus, Adalar, Adalbald, Adalbero and three Adalberts alone... and these are the ones on the first three pages alone! How are we supposed to find the right ones here? We can’t possibly read the whole book!”

Jupiter also took a look at the list of saints, but gave up just as quickly as Bob. “Okay, we have to try another way. The riddle says that a city was named after the mother. Since all three Kopperschmidt children live in this area and the red tower was also nearby, it is reasonable to assume that the place we’re looking for is also somewhere near Rocky Beach.”

Then he had a flash of inspiration. “Sure! It says here that the city is close to the angels. Angels—that means Los Angeles, the City of Angels. So how many cities or towns nearby can you think of that are named after saints?”

“Not one,” Pete said.

“Quite a lot,” Bob replied. “Santa Barbara, Santa Monica, Santa Clarita, Santa Ana... and not only cities, but islands such as Santa Rosa and Santa Catalina—both of which are part of the Channel Islands...”

“Of course! ‘Santa’ means ‘saint’,” Pete recalled.

“You don’t say, Pete,” Jupiter commented dryly.

“That means that we can now narrow down the list of saints,” Bob said and opened the book more purposefully.

First he skimmed over the text about St Barbara. “Well, St Barbara had a stressful life. She had herself baptized against her father’s will and was then tortured and stuff like that, but anyone who tried to harm her was either struck by lightning or turned to stone.”

“Doesn’t sound like the pious super-mother in the riddle,” Jupiter noted.

Bob turned the page to St Monica and after a few seconds, his face lit up. “Aha! Listen to this! St Monica lived in the fourth century in what is now Algeria and was an exemplary person in the Christian sense, converting her husband and children. However, one son, by the name of Augustine, became lazy and uncouth. Monica sent him to school in Carthage, but some time later, he ran away to Rome. The mother then had one hysterical fit after another, went to look for him and finally convinced him, and so on and so forth. Anyway, they have both been canonized, and the city of Santa Monica was named after Monica.”

“Bingo!” cried Pete.

“You said it,” Jupiter remarked.

“And what about the church?” Pete asked. “The one named after the son?”

“We’ll find that out very quickly,” Bob said and turned on the computer.

On the Internet, he quickly found the solution to the riddle. “There we have it! In Santa Monica, on Fourth Street, there is a church called ‘St Augustine by-the-Sea’, which is named after the very same Augustine.”

“By the sea!” cried Pete. “Isn’t that what the riddle say? ‘There is an old church by the sea.’”

“Fellas, I’d say we’ve solved this part of the riddle!” Jupiter was radiant. “Unfortunately we can only verify the rest tomorrow because by now, the church should be closed.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Pete. “Anyway, I’ll have to relax to take on another mystery.”

With anticipation for the next day, Bob and Pete said goodbye, but one minute after they had left Headquarters, they were already back at the door.

Surprised, Jupe asked: “Well, do you want to go to Santa Monica now?”

“Not so,” Bob replied.

“We thought you might be interested in this,” Pete added, placing a small, cube-shaped package on the desk. It was wrapped in brown paper on which someone had wrote three large question marks. “It was outside the gate.”

Jupiter put aside the encyclopaedia of saints in which he had leafed through a little more. “This is clearly for us!”

“You don’t say,” Pete said. “Go on, open it!”

The First Investigator carefully unwrapped the package. It was one of the already familiar Kopperschmidt wooden boxes.

Jupiter lifted the lid and saw the now-familiar wood wool. On removing it, there was another Mobimec. Carefully he put it on the table. This time it was two small figures standing opposite each other on a copper plate. One of them wore a knight’s armour and held a sword in his hand. On the edge of the plate was a keyhole. Bob rummaged through the box and found the key.

“Go, Bob! Wind it up!” demanded Jupiter.

Bob did not need Jupiter to tell him twice. He wound the mechanism and released the key.

The Mobimec whirled. The key turned back slowly. The two figures trembled slightly. Nothing else happened. Then suddenly the knight raised and drew his sword. With a well-aimed blow he cut the head off the other figure. The severed head flew across the trailer and hit the wall before dropping to the floor. The Three Investigators flinched back, almost taking cover from the toy knight. Only when the key stopped and everything was quiet did they dare to come closer again.

Where the head of the victim had been, a small, blood-red flag now rose from the neck. In the opening, there was a little note written in small black letters. It said:

*Let this be the last warning,
Mind your own business and quit.
Return the Boy Scout right now,
If not, the next shot will hit!*

11. A Church for Augustine

The next day, the sky was cloudy and it was even darker than usual at Headquarters.

Jupiter was sitting at the desk, lost in contemplation of the new Mobimec. He still hadn't found the severed head. It had disappeared somewhere in the chaos of the trailer, but that was not what the First Investigator was interested in. Instead, he kept staring at the warning written in tiny letters.

'The next shot will hit!' Secretly he wondered whether Pete would show up at all for the meeting today. After the shooting at the red tower, the Second Investigator had held up surprisingly well, but now, there was doubt that the shot might have just been a silly coincidence. This latest Mobimec proved that The Three Investigators were dealing with an opponent who knew very well who they were and what they were doing... and probably a lot more... Now, it wasn't just Pete who felt uneasy.

However at that moment, the Second Investigator entered Headquarters together with Bob. Jupiter was relieved. Pete seemed to be in a better mood than he had expected.

"I've thought of something," Pete opened the meeting. "There are actually only two people who could have sent us the Mobimec."

"Caitlin and George," Bob said.

Pete was visibly disappointed. "Oh! You came up with that too?"

"Well, it's obvious..." Bob explained. "The two of them showed up here, confronted Jupe and wanted the Boy Scout back, but they didn't get him. What could be more obvious than to threaten us? Caitlin probably had her father's macabre Mobimec lying around somewhere and adapted it for her own purpose. The result is a simple but effective threat."

Pete nodded eagerly. "What about 'the next shot will hit'? That could only relate to the first shot at the red tower. We were coming back from visiting Caitlin and George when Jupe discovered the tower. Do you remember? They must have followed us."

"It all sounds very logical," Jupiter agreed, "and they were also my first thoughts... but there's one question that unfortunately still remains unanswered—the question of why... Why would Caitlin and George shoot at you?"

"So I won't find the cave," Pete replied promptly.

"All right, Pete," Jupiter reasoned. "That assumes Caitlin knew about the cave... but that doesn't make sense if the riddle to the red tower was in Jeremy's box."

"You got that right," Bob said, "but it could be that George is the bad guy and Caitlin doesn't know anything about this."

"Possible," Jupiter said and nodded thoughtfully, "but even in this case, the motives are still in the dark... which means that we must investigate further in any case." He gave Pete an uncertain look.

"Why are you looking at me in such a funny way, Jupe? Are you expecting me to shake with fear and beg you to drop this case?"

"Well, to be honest—" Jupe began.

"I must disappoint you, Jupe, because I thought of something..." Pete continued. "This threat only means that someone is afraid of us, right?"

"You can put it that way..." Jupe agreed.

“—Because we’re on the trail of something, and we’re probably pretty close to the solution, otherwise George or whoever wouldn’t be trying to scare us. So we just have to solve the riddle and we’ll be left alone. So, what are we waiting for? We have an appointment with St Augustine.” Pete got up and moved towards the door.

“Pete?” Jupiter said.

“Yeah?”

“You never cease to amaze me.”

Pete grinned. “I know.”

St Augustine by-the-Sea didn’t show its age. The church had been rebuilt and modernized over the decades due to earthquake damage. The snow-white walls rose into the cloudy sky and were crowned by a tiny bell tower with a cross. A narrow strip of stained-glass windows was embedded in the masonry, shimmering in all the colours of the rainbow. The entrance door was wide open. There was no service at that time but the church was open for visitors. The Three Investigators locked their bikes and entered the church.

Immediately Bob felt this strange feeling he had every time he went into a church—the silence, the coolness, the size, the muffled voices of the other visitors, the echo of the footsteps... He found all this very reassuring and relaxing, at the same time, however, somehow oppressive. Bob always wanted to laugh out loud when he entered a church to break the spell of silence.

Slowly, The Three Investigators went further into the nave. The stained-glass window, which they had already seen from outside, was even more magnificent and radiant from inside. It was lined by a large organ, which stretched majestically towards the high ceiling. Apart from The Three Investigators, there were four or five other visitors, easily recognizable as tourists by their backpacks and cameras. Everyone was busy marvelling at the organ and taking pictures.

“Here we are,” mumbled Jupiter. “Let’s go to the altar and look around a bit.”

On the altar were two burning candles mounted on candlesticks. On the ground, to the left and right of the altar, were potted plants with yellow flowers. Of course, there was a pulpit. That was all.

“Pleasantly simple,” whispered the First Investigator, “and I do not say this for aesthetic reasons. Given that there are only two altar candles here, finding the hiding place shouldn’t be too much of a problem.”

“There’s nobody at the altar now, so let’s go,” Pete replied, walked briskly and stepped up the two steps to the altar.

Pete went to the candle on the left and Bob proceed to the right. There was nothing noticeable to see. They examined the candlesticks but even these were so simple that the search was over after only a few seconds—without result.

“There’s only one more possibility,” whispered Bob. He reached for the candlestick. Carefully, he used both hands to lift it, but there was nothing underneath. Pete did the same for the left candle, but found nothing as well.

“So much for that,” he muttered. “The riddle doesn’t seem that simple after all.”

“Are there really no other candles here?” Pete asked himself and turned around.

Jupiter and Bob followed him. Slowly they walked through the long nave and looked around. They did not find another candle.

“I don’t believe it!” Pete exclaimed.

“Well, fellas, I’m afraid we’re kind of on the wrong track,” Jupiter remarked. “Is it possible that we were wrong?”

“Well, as to the location, no way,” Bob said. “It refers to Santa Monica and this church. I don’t think there is any other possibility.”

Bob pulled the riddle text out of his pocket and read out the last line: “‘Take a look at the night candles, to find something that you will want.’ What other interpretations could there be?”

“We are not giving up so easily,” Jupiter decided. “Since we are here, we’ll wait a while for the visitors over there to leave and then we will do a more thorough search.”

In the meantime, there were only two visitors in the church besides them, so they pretended to look around as well. Not too long after, the visitors seemed to have finished their tour and were heading for the exit. Finally, the three of them were alone.

“Now, the opportunity is good. Let’s go!” Jupiter whispered excitedly and was already halfway back to the altar. “Search everywhere, fellas! The paper must be hidden here or somewhere!”

Bob and Pete got down on their knees and slid over the cold stone floor while Jupiter inspected the altar himself... but there was not much to examine. It was a block of stone, nothing more. There was almost no place to hide a piece of paper. Bob and Pete had also very soon checked all the gaps between the stone slabs without result.

“There’s nothing here—absolutely nothing,” growled Bob. “You can’t hide anything here, even if you wanted to—not even a little piece of paper.”

“Well, now what?” Pete asked, stood up and brushed the dust off his pants.

Steps echoed through the nave. Someone approached them. It was a man in a black suit with a bald head and a neat white beard. “Excuse me, but we close in ten minutes,” he whispered in a gentle voice. “If you could be so kind—”

“Of course,” Jupiter said, and gestured to his friends to leave. Then he turned once more to the man. “Excuse me, could I ask you a question?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Are these the only candles in the church?”

The man was visibly irritated. “In the public area of the church, yes.”

“Are these candles called ‘night candles’?” Bob asked.

“Night candles? No,” the man replied. “They are just candles. What is it about night candles?”

“We just heard something about the night candles here,” Bob replied.

“Oh, perhaps you might be referring to the evening primroses there,” the man said and pointed to the potted plants with yellow flowers on the left and right of the altar. “In German, evening primroses are known as ‘night candles’.”

“Aha!” Bob remarked and whispered to his friends. “Felix Kopperschmidt came from Switzerland! There’s the connection.”

“Evening primrose?” Jupiter continued to ask the man.

“The flowers there...” the man continued, “they are called evening primroses. They bloom after sunset and throughout the night, with the flowers closing up during daylight hours. That’s unlike most flowers and that’s why we chose them to decorate the altar.”

Jupiter could hardly hide his excitement. “This is... may... may we please have a look at the evening primrose?”

“Go ahead, but after that I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“Of course, sir!”

The man looked sceptically at The Three Investigators as he extinguished the altar candles and slowly moved away. Five seconds later, Jupe went over to the flower pot on the left while Pete and Bob attended to the one on the right. They tried to pretend that all they did was to admire the flower arrangements. Pete stroked reverently over the flowers while Bob examined the potting soil.

Apparently they did not do their thing very convincingly, because after only a few moments, the man returned. The smile had disappeared from his face. "Say, what are you guys doing?"

"We, uh..." Pete began.

"You've got to be kidding me! Whatever you're doing, stop it and please leave at once!"

"But sir," Pete began, "this is a misunderstanding! We—"

However, Jupiter pulled him by the sleeve towards the exit. He could only murmur an apology, then The Three Investigators left the church under the suspicious eyes of the man.

"Bummer!" Bob hissed as they were back on the street. "We were so close! We—" Bob fell silent when he noticed the broad grin on the face of the First Investigator.

Jupiter opened his right hand and held a piece of paper under Bob's nose with a few crumbs of potting soil still stuck to it.

"Jupe! You... you found it?" Bob exclaimed.

"Looks that way." Eagerly, the First Investigator unfolded the note. Once again, it was written in the tiny curly letters. Jupiter read aloud:

*You will need to follow the path,
To where it is night and not day.
But you have to find the number,
To align the steel for the way.*

*You start by taking one from three,
One from ten, and three from twenty.
Next up is three from twenty-five,
Don't stop here as there are plenty.*

*It could be three or five from nine,
Yet it doesn't really matter.
You might want to take one from ten,
For you to get even further.*

*You should take four from twenty-four,
That is as good as can be seen.
Four from seven is next on line,
That's followed by one from nineteen.*

*Three from sixteen, then one from two,
Lastly, it's two from twenty-three.
Now you have all you need to find,
Let's go and follow the journey.*

Jupiter lowered the note and looked at his friends expressionlessly. Then a smile crept up on his face. "I think this is where it gets really interesting."

12. A Riddle for Jupiter

“Interesting,” said Pete, when they had arrived back at Headquarters and took a closer look at the riddle again. “As soon as the rest of the world loses the thread completely and doesn’t understand a single word, Jupiter Jones finds it ‘really interesting’. Jupe, are you absolutely sure that you are from this planet?”

But Jupiter wasn’t listening at all. He was already completely absorbed in the riddle.

“Seriously, Jupe,” Bob said. “Do you have any idea how to solve this riddle?”

“Not yet,” murmured the First Investigator, “but that’s why it is so exciting. It’s a code... that much is clear.”

“How do you want to start?” Bob asked.

“It’s about a path, it’s about night and day...” Jupe murmured.

“It’s for finding a number,” Pete added. “A code of some sort?”

“Possibly,” Bob said, “and about steel... to ‘align the steel’... whatever that means. What does night and day have to do with steel? When I think about it, the individual riddles that we have seen so far seem to be unrelated anyway. Sure, the handwriting and style are always the same, but the contents seem so different.”

“—As if they were written for different people,” mumbled Jupiter. “Anyway, if we solve the riddle, we are one step closer to the answer.” He reached for a pencil and a piece of paper.

“What are you doing?” Pete asked.

“I’m trying to decipher the code,” Jupiter replied. “When you look at it closely, it seems simple. Felix Kopperschmidt tells us pretty much exactly what we have to do. On the whole, it talks about following a path and to do that, you need a number. Following that, there are four verses of the riddle that give some clue as to the number. I presume there are four numbers, one corresponding to a verse. So I now need to figure out how to get a number from each verse.

“Let’s start with the first verse... ‘Take one from three, then one from ten, and three from twenty...’ You just have to follow his instructions, then you’ll get the solution, I’m sure.”

“Well, let’s go,” the Second Investigator replied, crossing his arms and leaning back relaxed. He knew that he was on the outside of this riddle... Numbers—he has been dreading them since the beginning of time. He might as well watch Jupiter Jones solve the riddle by himself.

““You start by taking one from three, one from ten, and three from twenty...” Jupiter muttered, writing on a piece of paper. “If I take one from three, which means to subtract... that gives me two. Next is one from ten... which gives nine; and three from twenty to get seventeen.” He wrote down the result. “Then we have three from twenty-five which gives twenty-two.”

“2, 9, 17, 22,” Jupiter summarized, “and that’s from the first verse. Now, would this be a sequence of some sort... Let’s see... 2 to 9 is 7; 9 to 17 is 8; 17 to 22 is 5... Now what does that tell you?”

“Nothing,” Pete muttered as he reached for a sports magazine on a shelf.

However, Jupiter did not even look up, as he continued to ponder over the numbers. “There seems to be no logic looking at it in this way... Hmm... perhaps the next verse can

tell me something...

"... Three or five from nine?" he wondered. "Which is it? Should I subtract three or five from nine? And why does it not matter? Can someone explain to me what this is all about?"

"I don't know," Bob said. He too, had already given up the idea of getting to the bottom of this mystery.

"You don't even have to ask me," Pete quickly said, flipping his magazine. "Anyway, I don't know what you're doing right now."

"I have been verbalizing what I am doing!" Jupiter replied half indignantly.

"I know. It's useless to me. If I hear more than two numbers in a sentence, my brain automatically shuts down. It's a kind of built-in cooling system—very handy if you don't want to lose your mind in maths class."

Jupiter shook his head without understanding. "You're treating this as if it were advanced calculus. It's just basic arithmetic problems."

The First Investigator kept on calculating and ended up with a long column of numbers on the slip of paper.

"Now what?" Pete asked.

"Well..." Jupiter mumbled and stared at his scribbles. "The riddle gives a total of twelve numbers, and they don't seem to be in a sequence. Even if I add up the numbers from each verse, it doesn't really tell me anything. Hmm... I don't understand this."

"Wow," Pete said. "You don't understand something? I don't know what to say."

"I think," Jupe finally said, resolutely crumpling up the sheet of paper with his scribbles, "we're barking up the wrong tree. This is about something other than a simple arithmetic problem."

"Oh, yeah?" Bob asked.

"Yes."

"Which is?"

"It may be a difficult mathematical problem... Perhaps the clues are talking about fractions: 'Take one from three' meaning a third; 'one from ten'—one-tenth; ... and so on."

Pete wasn't sure he understood everything correctly, but he nodded encouragingly and handed Jupe a new piece of paper.

Eagerly, the First Investigator set to work. In the end, he had written down another set of numbers—this time, fractions. In no time at all, the whole piece of paper was filled up with digits that made Pete almost dizzy.

"So for the first verse, the lowest common denominator is..." Jupe mumbled and pinched his lower lip. "300? And if you add up the fractions, we have $211/300$. My goodness... well, what does that indicate? Let's go on to the next verse then... Hmm... The 'three or five from nine' really stumps me. Why is he even giving a choice here and then saying that it doesn't matter?"

"Jupe, what on earth are you doing now?" Pete asked.

"I'm figuring out the total of the fractions," the First Investigator muttered absently.

"Why don't you use a calculator?" Bob suggested and handed him one.

"Might as well," Jupiter said and proceeded to tap on the calculator buttons.

After a few minutes, he said: "Okay, I have the total of the fractions for each verse, and they are $211/300$, $13/20$ or $59/90$, $631/798$, and $285/368$! There you go! What does this mean?"

"Nothing I suppose," Pete said.

"What about if I convert them into decimals," he decided. "That gives... uh... arrgh!" Jupiter's lower lip threatened to burst, but he continued to perform another arithmetic feat on

the paper.

Finally, he exclaimed: “2.70185 or 2.92407!”

“Wow,” Pete remarked. “This is... really cool. Right, uh... super impressive. I mean... you’ve got it without a doubt... but what does that give us?”

“Nothing at all,” Jupiter replied as he crumpled the paper and threw it away. “Absolutely nothing. The numbers makes absolutely no sense!”

“Now what?” Pete asked.

“I’ll start again.”

And so it went on all evening. Jupiter was in his element. He juggled with the numbers, always tried out new approaches and filled one piece of paper after the next in no time. However, each time it was with the same result—they ended up crumpled up in the rubbish bin.

Bob and Pete left Jupiter to his fate at some point and set off home. The First Investigator probably didn’t even notice them gone as he was completely immersed in his world.

It took quite a while before the frustration became too much for Jupiter and he put the pen aside and let himself fall back. Tired, he looked outside. It was already pitch dark but the rain had subsided in the meantime. Only a few drops of water painted circles in the shiny puddles on the salvage yard. The clouds illuminated by the lights of the city moved slowly across the sky, leaving behind deep black fields in which the stars were shining. A cat crawled out of a shelter and made its way in search of a midnight snack.

Suddenly, at the main gate of the salvage yard, there was a figure. Jupiter crouched down in alarm. For a moment, he had forgotten about the riddle. Someone was tampering with something at the gate! Unfortunately it was too dark to see who it was.

“An intruder!” it shot through the First Investigator’s head. It’s now or never! He had to know who that person was and what he or she was up to!

Jupiter let himself slide from his chair and crawled across the floor until he reached a hatch. This was the opening to Tunnel Two, a secret passage below the trailer that led to their outdoor workshop.

Jupiter crawled into the stuffy, damp, and dark tunnel and groped his way to the exit. Quickly, he crept along the fence to Green Gate One, one of their secret exits from the salvage yard. Then he triggered a mechanism that enabled the loose wooden boards to swing aside.

The First Investigator peeked out the opening and glanced to the main gate. The mysterious figure was no longer there. Jupiter cast a thousand curses inside. He had been too slow! But he hadn’t heard a car. The intruder couldn’t have been far away.

Suddenly the neighbour’s dog started to bark. He always did this exactly that when someone passed his kennel.

The First Investigator squeezed through the opening and out onto the side walk. Then he scurried past the cones of light from the street lamp, ran across the road junction and carefully peeked around the corner of the fence of the neighbouring property.

Hadn’t there been some movement? A shadow? There, behind the hedge? Jupiter slowed down and carefully crept closer step by step.

He listened. Were there footsteps? Or loud breathing? That stupid mutt drove him crazy! He just wouldn’t stop barking!

Jupiter decided to risk a look behind the hedge. He slowly pushed forward, turned his head—and suddenly, a huge shadow lunged at him. Something stung his face. Jupiter

screamed and held his hands in front of his eyes.

There were footsteps! Somebody bumped into him! Unable to see, Jupiter reached out his hand, grabbed something and clung on tightly. It was a piece of the stranger's clothing.

Something jingled. Blinking, Jupiter swung his arms as he tried to wrestle the stranger to the ground, but he had no chance. The figure escaped his grip and fled. Jupiter set off in pursuit, stumbled through the blurred darkness and fell. He hit the ground so hard that it took his breath away for seconds. Helplessly, he watched the figure disappear around the next street corner.

With difficulty, Jupiter stood up and rubbed his eyes. He blinked constantly. It took a while before he could see normally again.

Slowly he returned to the scene of the incident. Now he saw what had swung out of the darkness onto his face—it had been a leafy, thorny branch which was now lying on the ground. Jupiter kicked it angrily.

Something appeared underneath. On the paved garage entrance of the neighbour, there were some small objects. They must have fallen out of the stranger's pocket when Jupiter reached for his clothes. He remembered the jingling.

He looked at the objects. There were a few coins, a wad of paper... and a key!

Jupiter picked up the stuff and returned to the salvage yard. There was something hanging from the main gate. Perhaps the stranger had left something, just like the night before.

It was a small wooden box with the Kopperschmidt logo, and it was attached to the gate with a piece of parcel tape. Jupiter took the box and curiously opened it.

Inside was a key... and a small, oblong metal case. Jupiter only recognized it when he took it out of the box and held it up to the street lamp.

It was a miniature coffin!

13. A Warning for the Boys

Pete frowned when he saw the miniature coffin lying on the desk at Headquarters the next day. “What is this?” he asked.

“The warning that the stranger left at the gate last night,” explained Jupiter.

“There’s a keyhole on the side,” Bob remarked. “Does that mean this thing is also a Mobimec?”

Jupiter nodded.

“Have you tried it yet?” Bob asked.

“Yes.”

“And?”

The First Investigator made an inviting gesture. “Try it yourself...”

Bob took the key on the table, inserted it into the keyhole, and wound it. Inside, the coffin rattled and purred, then a sombre, solemn melody sounded. Bob knew it. It was Chopin’s *Funeral March*. He felt a slight discomfort.

Then slowly and squeakily the coffin lid opened. Bob flinched involuntarily. Inside the coffin, on blood-red velvet, there were three coloured question marks—one white, one blue, one green.

“This is really going a bit too far.” Pete cried and closed the lid. The music stopped.

“Don’t be like that,” Jupiter said and grinned. “This is just a harmless little joke.”

“Joke? This guy’s trying to kill us, Jupe!” Pete exclaimed. “This is an obvious threat.”

“Didn’t you say yesterday that a threat only means that someone is afraid of us? ... That all we had to do was solve the case and we’ll be left alone?” Jupe countered.

“What do I care about my high-spirited chatter of yesterday!”

“Pete...” said the First Investigator calmly, “if the stranger had wanted to harm me, he would have had an excellent opportunity to do so last night. Instead, he ran away. You were quite right... he’s afraid of us!”

“People who are afraid are always the most dangerous,” murmured Pete.

“Besides, this coffin is not the only thing the stranger left behind,” Jupiter continued, placing the coins, the note and the key on the table one after the other. “Presenting Exhibits ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’.”

“Where did you get these?” Bob asked.

“The stranger lost these items when I grabbed his jacket, or whatever it was.”

Bob curiously took the note and unfolded it. The pencil writing was scrawly and smudged. When Bob had finally deciphered them, he made a disappointed face.

“What is it, Bob?” Pete asked. “What does the note say? Another riddle?”

Bob cleared his throat and read: “Bread, cheese, orange juice, peppers, tomatoes, ham, peanut butter, TV Guide, toilet paper.” He looked up. “This is just a shopping list!”

“I have come to the same conclusion,” Jupiter said calmly.

“Great,” Pete said. “I can hardly contain my enthusiasm. So what are we supposed to do with a shopping list? Do you think there’s any way we can find out who’s been desperate for bread, ham and toilet paper lately?”

“No,” replied Jupiter. “Believe it or not, my focus was more on Exhibit ‘D’—the key.”

Bob picked it up. Actually, it was two keys on a key chain that said 'I Love San Francisco'. "Looks like a house key... and one for the back door or the garage or something."

"Great," Pete said. "Now we just need to find someone who has a house with a back door or a garage... and who lives in San Francisco or has been there before, or who knows someone who gave him the 'I Love San Francisco' key chain. That narrows down the suspects considerably, don't you think? I'd say it's somewhere in the region of twenty to thirty million. That's a rough guess."

Jupiter pulled a face. "Your sarcasm is quite counter-productive, Pete. A key will get us somewhere. After all, we have two prime suspects."

"Caitlin and George?" Bob surmised.

"Exactly."

"Of course!" cried Bob. "So if these keys belong to either of their apartments, we have the culprit. Jupe, we should go straight to Santa Monica and—"

Jupiter raised his hands. "Hold on, hold on, fellas! I was already in Santa Monica."

Pete frowned. "You were in Santa Monica? When?"

"After school."

"After school?" Pete looked at his watch. "School just finished an hour ago... and we've been here for fifteen minutes. Are you trying to tell us you made it to Santa Monica and back in that little time?"

"Well... actually, I had a little more time. My last class was... uh... cancelled."

"Cancelled? No teacher was sick today, if I remembered correctly."

"True," Jupiter affirmed.

"So who cancelled your class?" Pete continued to probe.

"Me. I suddenly felt not at all well and had to leave."

Bob and Pete looked at each other in surprise.

"You skipped your last class?" cried Bob. "You? Let me guess—you had gym class."

"Yes, I had gym... and no, I didn't play hooky, I just shifted the physical exercise from the sports field to the road, cycling to Santa Monica and back... so no one can accuse me of being lazy and skipping exercise."

Pete shook his head in feigned bewilderment. "Jupiter Jones... now you're skipping school because of our investigation work. Where is this going?"

"Could we please get back to the subject at hand? So I was at Caitlin's apartment... and guess what? The key didn't fit, so it wasn't her who attacked me last night."

"That leaves George," Bob said.

"Right," Pete remarked. "Unfortunately, we don't know where he lives, and we don't even know his last name. The only connection we have to him is Caitlin, and I don't suppose you can get anything out from her."

"I've already taken care of that." Jupe smiled with a grin.

"Let me guess... you asked Jeremy?" Pete wondered.

"I did, but Jeremy does not know George any more than we do," Jupe replied. "In fact, he only saw him for the first time that day at his brother's house."

"No surprise there," Bob remarked. "As we know, the siblings are not on talking terms, let alone meeting each other. So how did you find out about George?"

"Anthony Quinn," Jupe said. "I got Anthony's contact from Jeremy, and guess what... George works at the same law firm as Caitlin. He is also a lawyer, but Anthony does not know his last name or where he lives."

"—But we know Caitlin's office from her card, so—" Bob began.

“—We’ll trail George from there,” Pete completed the sentence. “Well, Jupe... that’s a lot you did by just playing hooky. A time well spent, I guess.”

Bob grinned, reached for Exhibit ‘D’ and together they left Headquarters.

The law firm ‘Miller & Partners’ was located in the business district of Santa Monica. Pete parked his car in a position where they could observe the main entrance as well as the exit from the underground car park.

To play it safe, Jupe used his mobile phone to call the law firm to ask for George. This was just to ensure that the lawyer was in the office. After the receptionist put his call through, Jupe did not need to wait long for George to answer. The First Investigator terminated the call after he heard George’s voice.

“We’re set,” Jupe announced. “Just make sure that we take note of all the cars that come out from the car park.”

It was close to the end of office hours. They did not have to wait long. Bob noticed George coming out of the main entrance. Determined, the lawyer walked over to a black BMW parked nearby, got in and roared away.

“Go for it, Pete!” Jupe instructed.

14. A Mission for Bob

Pete let a moment pass before he started the engine and followed George.

The Second Investigator was a master at tailing a car unnoticed. With practice, he always kept just enough distance to the BMW so that he barely lost sight of it. George, on the other hand, would have had to look for him in the rear-view mirror to spot him.

The journey did not take long from Santa Monica to Rocky Beach. In front of Felix Kopperschmidt's house, the black BMW finally slowed down and stopped. George got out, stepped through the garden gate, walked to the front door and a few moments later, he went into the house.

Pete stopped a distance away along the road.

"He's visiting Craig," Bob marvelled. "Who would have thought of it? But why is he here? The two of them hardly know each other. Can you make any sense of it?"

"No," Jupiter confessed, "but we can find out."

"Do you want to listen at the window?" Pete asked.

Jupiter shook his head. "I think a more offensive approach is needed this time. We want to track down the intruder, don't we? And we suspect it's George... which is why I think the best idea is for us to show ourselves to him. He must see that we haven't given up because of his petty threats... on the contrary. Then he is under pressure and has to think of something new to deter us... and we will catch him in the act."

"Pete, you stay here and see what happens. When George comes out before us, you follow him. If you're off tailing him, then we will meet back at Headquarters."

"All right."

Jupiter and Bob left the car and entered the Kopperschmidt property. After the lion had sneezed at the front door, it took a moment before Martha Lynn opened the door.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, half stunned, half angry.

"Sorry to disturb you," Jupiter began. "We would like to speak to your husband."

"You have an appointment with him?"

"No, we came by on impulse. Is he home?"

"He is," Martha Lynn replied hesitantly, "but he has a visitor right now." She paused for a moment to consider. "It will probably not last long. If you wish, you may wait in the kitchen." She let them both go in.

In the kitchen, Martha Lynn went to a copper plate that was attached to the wall. She pressed on it and a flap flipped down to reveal a panel of buttons with numbers. Martha Lynn pressed one of the buttons.

"What kind of invention is it this time?" Bob asked nicely as he was uncomfortable with the silence.

"I'm calling the Home Express," Martha Lynn explained succinctly and without the hint of a smile. A chugging sound approached, and shortly thereafter, the toy train rolled into the kitchen through an opening in the wall. "If you must know, I'm sending a message to Craig to tell him that you are here."

Martha Lynn reached for a notepad and scribbled a message on it. Then she put the message in one of the wagons, went to the control panel and entered a code. At once the train

started moving and left the kitchen.

“That’s great,” Jupiter said enthusiastically. “Such a Home Express is really practical. Do you use it much?”

“Listen, Jupiter,” Martha Lynn said indignantly. “I really appreciate your enthusiasm for my father-in-law’s work... but I’ll be honest with you—since you got involved, there’s been nothing but trouble. Craig and Caitlin are fighting each other more than ever. What were you thinking, going to visit Mrs Loughlin? That was none of your business! This is a family affair! ... And it still is.”

“But...” Jupiter started silently and had to clear his throat. “If your father-in-law is really in danger, then—”

“This still isn’t your business—investigators or not.” Martha Lynn turned away abruptly to deal with the dirty dishes that were in the sink.

Bob and Jupiter looked at each other in dismay. Icy silence spread through the kitchen. While Martha Lynn was piling the plates and pots back and forth, Jupiter pretended to be interested in the kitchen’s décor. He looked closely at the toaster, at the colourful flowers on the window sill that seemed to come from the garden, at the postcards from New York, San Francisco, and Miami pinned to the refrigerator door, compared the time on the kitchen clock with his watch, and wondered what might be going on between Craig and George... and when they could finally escape the unpleasant atmosphere in the kitchen.

As if the thought had been a signal, he suddenly heard footsteps and loud voices approaching the kitchen door.

“George, don’t you feel a bit stupid yourself, playing messenger boy for Caitlin?” Craig asked angrily. “If my sister has anything to say to me, whether it’s about those three boys or anything else, she can come to me herself!”

Jupiter and Bob went to the door and entered the hall. The First Investigator cleared his throat. “Is this about us?”

George spun around. “What are you doing here?”

“That’s what I’d like to know as well,” Craig said.

“We wanted to talk to you,” Jupiter turned to Craig. “As you probably just learned, we were at Virginia Loughlin. She gave us something—something that raises some questions. Perhaps it would be better if we talked about this in private.” Jupiter turned to George as cool and casual as possible.

George stared at Jupiter angrily and then said to Craig: “I’m going to tell Caitlin that you’d rather talk to a couple of wannabe investigators than talk to me. I’m sure she’d be interested.” He turned around and stormed out of the house.

When the bang of the slammed door had died away, it took a moment for Craig to calm down. Breathing heavily, he stood in the entrance hall and seemed angry and guilty at the same time.

“What did he want?” Bob asked and pointed to the door.

“What else! He was here to tell me what my sister thinks of me... like I don’t know that,” Craig said. “Caitlin was complaining about you going to the Black Lady. Of course she blamed me for that... as usual. In return, she sends her fiancé over. She’s not talking to me again... but that’s nothing new.”

“Forgive me, Craig, it was really not our intention to rekindle the dispute between you and your siblings,” Jupe said. “We just wanted to help and—”

“That’s the limit!” Martha Lynn interrupted him. “Help? Until now, you have done nothing but harm!”

“But Linnie,” Craig said softly. “The boys can’t help Caitlin’s stubbornness. They only meant well.”

“I know, but... this is getting too much, Craig. Your own father is sending you a message! No, he’s sending messages to your brother and sister and you! An important one! And three boys who have nothing to do with the family throw themselves on it like vultures. You don’t seem to care! But that’s over now.”

“Well, we... uh... might better go,” Bob suggested.

“Yes, Bob, that will be the best,” Jupiter quickly agreed.

The situation had completely slipped his mind. His mission to make it clear to George that The Three Investigators were far from giving up, but it was time to go now.

“What did you want from me?” Craig asked irritated.

“Some other time,” Jupiter said and headed for the front door.

“My jacket’s still in the kitchen!” Bob remembered, and he quickly went to get it.

The jacket was on the counter top next to the refrigerator. He reached for it and was about to turn away when suddenly something caught his attention. It took a moment for the reason to seep into his consciousness. Then he went closer and frowned. Had Jupiter, the otherwise so attentive observer, perhaps missed something when they were in the kitchen earlier? Bob went closer and took the item that had captured his attention. He wanted to check a spontaneous suspicion.

Bob almost dropped his jacket when he saw that he had hit a jackpot.

“Bob?” Jupiter’s voice came from outside the kitchen. “You coming?”

“Yes!” Bob answered nervously, put the item back in its place and left the kitchen in a hurry.

When Jupiter and Bob entered Headquarters twenty minutes later, Pete had left a message on the answering machine.

“Hi, fellas! So, I followed George, and now I’m outside Caitlin’s apartment building. She’s got a light on in her apartment... and I’ve already seen two shadows by the window. Now what? Should I stay here and wait for George to come back out? I’d appreciate it if you’d call me back... or come over and join me on this stake-out! It’s really boring being alone. See ya.” The answering machine beeped and then it was quiet.

“Well, let’s not leave poor Pete alone too long, otherwise he’ll do something stupid,” Jupiter said and didn’t even take his jacket off. “Come on, Bob!”

Bob hesitated. “Do you need me for this stake-out?”

Jupiter did not understand. “Why? What do you mean?”

“Well, I... I need to check on something.”

“Something else? What is it?”

Bob hesitated again. He had not told Jupiter about his discovery in the kitchen. Why, he didn’t know for sure himself. Maybe he wanted to keep a secret for once, as Jupiter usually did so often.

“I’ll tell you later,” he said.

Jupiter was visibly dissatisfied with the answer, but he was obviously in too much of a hurry for a discussion. “Very well, as you say. We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

Bob nodded.

After Jupiter had left, Bob reached for the phone book. He looked up an address. Then he too took off.

The hamburger was warm and huge and greasy. Jupiter's mouth watered. He opened it as wide as possible and bit heartily into the soft bun.

"Watching you like this... you could be advertising this stuff," Pete said, slightly nauseated.

"I wouldn't mind. Then I'm sure I'll get everything for free," Jupiter smacked his lips and took another bite.

Jupiter and Pete sat in the car and watched the apartment where Caitlin lived. There had been no activity behind the windows for over an hour.

Soon Jupiter had eaten everything from the fast food bag that Pete had not hidden from him. He threw the trash in the back seat and pulled a piece of paper from his pocket.

"Firstly," Pete said, "don't throw trash my car! And secondly, what are you doing? You want to write a letter? To Lys, perhaps?"

Jupiter suppressed a burp. "Firstly, pardon me. Secondly, no—I thought we had forgotten all about that."

"Postponed," Pete corrected him. "We just postponed it."

"Well, we'll have to postpone it another time because we have more important things to do now." Jupiter pointed to the paper. It was the riddle.

"You think you can concentrate better here than at Headquarters?"

"I am full after all, and that is the best prerequisite," Jupiter replied and immersed himself in the confusion of numbers.

The closer Bob got to his destination, the more nervous he became. He began to have doubts. Maybe it hadn't been a good idea to go off on his own after all.

What should he do if something went wrong? What if he was wrong? What if he overestimated his abilities and needed help? On the other hand, Bob had the vague feeling that his nervousness was unnecessary. Nothing would happen to him. He would just be revealing a secret.

Finally Bob reached his destination. He reached into his pocket and took out Exhibit 'D'—the key that the stranger had lost last night along with some change and a shopping list.

When Bob stood at the door, his hand trembled slightly. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment and put the key in the keyhole.

It fit.

Bob unlocked the door, opened it and entered. There were no lights on anywhere. He left it that way so as not to be seen from outside. Silently and carefully, he moved through the room in the little light coming from the windows.

What immediately caught his eye were... Mobimecs! There were Mobimecs all over the place. They stood, sat and lay everywhere—on the stairs, on shelves, cupboards and tables. There were even two Scuttle Bugs. Some of the copper-coloured figures were equipped with keys, but Bob resisted the temptation to try them out. As he now knew, Mobimecs were unpredictable.

Finally, Bob had seen enough. He paused for a moment to consider whether he should search for evidence to support his suspicions. However, the fact that the stranger's key fit the door was proof enough. So the question was no longer who was responsible for the threats. It was a question of why... and that, he thought, only the person in question could answer.

Bob went into the living room, sat in an armchair and waited... and waited. Somewhere in the house, a clock was ticking. Bob was counting the seconds.

He waited until he heard a noise at the door... until the door was opened and a light turned on somewhere... until footsteps approached and someone entered the room.

“Show time,” Bob thought to himself as he stood up and said: “Good evening!”

15. A Solution for the Riddle

“Bob!”

“That’s right.”

The horror and surprise quickly disappeared and gave way to a certain fierceness. “So you found me after all. I must confess that I expected Jupiter rather than you.”

“I was the one who found out who attacked him last night,” Bob said.

“It was the key, wasn’t it? It put you on my trail.”

“Right. The key and the shopping list.”

“Shopping list? I lost a shopping list?”

Bob nodded. “I am not actually here to explain the work of The Three Investigators, rather, I want to know what drives you. I guess you were responsible not only for the Mobimec with the severed head, but also for the coffin with the question marks.”

The man shrugged his shoulders. “How am I going to put it... I was the executing hand... but someone else is responsible.”

Bob considered for a moment whether he should go into this hint in more detail, but then decided against it. It could wait. There was only one question that was really important right now—a question that was probably the key to the whole thing—to Felix Kopperschmidt and his mysterious masterpiece.

“Why? Why were you so eager to divert us from our investigation?”

“Because there’s no way you can continue to deal with Felix Kopperschmidt and his riddles. This ruins the whole plan. If you solve the riddles, it will all have been for nothing.”

Jupiter’s hair stood on end—not from shock or despair but because he had been tussling it for the last twenty minutes while muttering endless strings of numbers half aloud to himself.

Pete frowned at the First Investigator. Then he looked up at Caitlin’s window. Still nothing moved.

“That’s nonsense about the numbers,” Jupiter finally said and looked up from his scribbles. “Absolutely nonsense. Whatever the riddle is, there’s no numerical code behind it, I’m pretty sure.”

“You’re pretty sure? You disappoint me, Jupe,” Pete remarked.

“Okay, absolutely sure. What other ways are there to encode a message?”

“Letters,” Pete said into the blue. “Maybe the numbers are just to freak us out, and it’s all about letters. Anyway, I’m much better with them. There aren’t that many of those either—only 26.” Pete was aware that he had simply talked without thinking. He just felt he had to say something.

Apparently he had landed a jackpot, because Jupiter stared at him astonished. “That’s not such a stupid idea, Pete! Letters!”

“Yeah, smart, huh?” Pete grinned insecurely. “So I suppose you now have to map those numbers to letters.”

“Not only letters but words... words in the verse!” Jupiter exclaimed. “If it says ‘Take one from three’, ‘one from ten’, and so on, maybe it means ‘take the first letter of the third word’ and ‘take the first letter of the tenth word’! That makes a lot of sense. ‘The ‘three or

five from nine' doesn't matter because the 'third letter' and the 'fifth letter' of the 'ninth word' could be the same!"

Jupiter threw himself on the riddle and started counting words and letters. "There you go!" he exclaimed. "The ninth word is 'where' and the third and fifth letters are both 'e'! This is what the riddle was all about, Pete. You've figured it out!"

Pete grinned up to his ears. Of course, he knew that Jupiter had figured it out, not him, but he did trigger something in the right direction. As long as the First Investigator gave him the credit, he didn't mind. There were not too many instances like this.

"Finally! Let's solve the riddle!" Jupiter pulled out a pencil, counted the letters one by one, and wrote them down. Letter by letter, the code was put together. "There is it—'Nine-eight-two'!" he announced.

"Nine-eight-two," Pete repeated. "Geez, Juve! This is really it! Nine-eight-two—some kind of code or something. We've done it!" However, his euphoria died away as quickly as it had come. "—But what do we do with it?"

"It's actually given in the very introductory verse of the riddle!" Jupiter said.

Pete frowned. "What was that?"

"Look... it says..." Jupiter read it out: "'You will need to follow the path to where it is night and not day... but you have to find the number to align the steel for the way.' So now we have the number—nine-eight-two!"

But the Second Investigator still did not understand. "Yeah, so? To follow the path to somewhere, we now have the code to align the steel. What does that mean?"

"That I do not know yet," Juve said. "It's a journey along a path to where it is night and not day..."

Suddenly, Pete sat up straight and stared out the window. "Here he comes!"

"Who?"

"George! He's just leaving the building! And heading for his car."

The two investigators watched George get into his car and drive off.

"After him!" said Jupiter.

The journey did not take very long. Pete skilfully followed Caitlin's friend until he stopped in front of a small family home in Venice. Pete parked at a safe distance and the two investigators waited until George got out and went into the house.

"And now what?" Pete asked.

"Now we'll see if the key fits," Jupiter replied and got out of the car.

"I... I'm gonna stay here, okay?" Pete suggested.

Jupiter nodded benevolently and slammed the door. As he walked towards the house, he searched his trouser pocket for the key. There was no key. He checked his jacket pocket. Nothing. The key wasn't there.

Jupiter tried to remember. Had he even put it in his pocket? Someone must have taken it. Then he remembered—Bob!

Jupiter hurried back to the car and got in.

"What? What's wrong?" Pete asked.

"I don't have the key! It's with Bob! We need to get back to Headquarters. Let's go!"

Headquarters was deserted. Bob wasn't there... and the key wasn't on the desk or anywhere else.

Jupiter swore. "This can't be happening. The key is not here!"

“Where is Bob anyway?” Pete asked. “At home?”

“I have no idea. He wouldn’t tell me.”

“He wouldn’t tell you? Why not?”

“Because I was on a secret mission...” a voice came from behind.

Stunned, Pete and Jupiter turned around. Bob had appeared in the doorway.

“Bob!” cried Pete. “Where did you come from?”

“I had a meeting... with an informant.”

The First Investigator didn’t like that at all. “With an informant? Bob, what’s going on?”

Bob smiled weakly. “I have solved a mystery—all alone this time, and the solution has thrown the whole case into confusion.”

“We solved a mystery too,” Pete said, “the number from the riddle. Imagine it’s a code! But we still do not know what it is for—”

“I know what the code is for,” Bob said, “but I hope you haven’t spoken to anyone about it.”

“No,” Pete replied, confused. “We were tailing George, but we didn’t have the key with us and—”

“Forget George!” Bob interrupted him, “and forget the riddle too... in fact, all the riddles.”

“Bob,” said Jupiter, laboriously restrained. “Would you please tell us what you know?”

Bob sighed and sat down. “Yesterday you had a very interesting thought, Juve. Remember how we talked about the number riddle and how the individual riddles don’t really fit together? Then you said that the riddles could have been written for different people. You hit the nail on the head with that one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Felix Kopperschmidt wrote the riddles for different people, yes—but not for us. By solving them, we put everything at risk and almost destroyed his masterpiece.”

“Bob!” Jupiter repeated indignantly. “Now tell us the whole story from the beginning.”

Bob nodded, and then he reported what he had found out. Jupiter and Pete listened to him in silence... and they couldn’t get out of their amazement.

“Of course!” Jupiter finally said. “Everything makes sense now! In fact, we never wondered what the riddles were actually connected with. A riddle that requires physical effort, a riddle that deals with saints and historical backgrounds, and a riddle concerning numbers and letters. At first sight, it was a rather arbitrary mix, but on second glance—”

“—It was very carefully planned and not arbitrary at all,” Pete finished the sentence, “and we almost messed everything up... but what should we do now? Can we repair the damage?”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip without a break and remained silent for a long time. Then he nodded slowly. “We can... by putting everything back as far as we can... and then wait and see how it goes without interfering. Let’s get to work, fellas.”

In the next few hours, The Three Investigators cracked their brains to discuss how to restore the whole process back for the Kopperschmidt siblings.

It wasn’t clear cut as the cave was already with Craig, so they decided to resume the process from the Black Lady stage, with some modifications. They would return to her, the Boy Scout intact with the church riddle as before.

At the church, instead of the number riddle, The Three Investigator would place the tower riddle in the potting soil of the evening primroses. However, the text of this riddle

would be modified by removing references to the home for the Scuttle Bug—which was now irrelevant. This would lead to the red tower. The Second Investigator would go up the tower once more to place the box, but now it would contain the number riddle instead of the cave.

By the end of the next day, The Three Investigators had completed their tasks. Jupiter then called Craig to tell him that his father's wooden box was now back in Virginia Loughlin's possession and that he and his siblings would have to go there at the same time if they wanted to get it.

After Jupiter had hung up, he leaned back relaxed and crossed his arms behind his head. "Now," he sighed, "we have to let things take their own course."

16. A Journey for the Home Express

It took one full week until The Three Investigators heard from someone involved in the Kopperschmidt case again. They were just helping Uncle Titus at the salvage yard sorting defective kitchen appliances when the phone rang at Headquarters.

Jupiter ran off and just made it to the phone before the answering machine took over. It was their informant.

“Jupiter? It’s me. It’s time. You did it. There’s a meeting tonight at 8 pm at the Kopperschmidt house. I’ll be there. Will you come?”

“Of course we will!” cried Jupiter delightedly. “—But how are you gonna explain our presence to the Kopperschmidts?”

“I’ll think of something. See you tonight!”

When The Three Investigators reached the house of Felix Kopperschmidt, the cars of Jeremy, Caitlin and Mr Quinn were already parked outside. They saw Caitlin and George enter the house.

“Just in time,” Bob said. “I don’t want to miss a thing!”

“My concern is that they won’t let us in,” Pete said.

But Jupiter waved away. “They will. After all, we are no longer a threat now. Besides, we have two people on our side.”

Pete hurried to be the first to get to the two knight statues so he could step on the mechanism. Bob made the lion sneeze. Shortly afterwards, Anthony Quinn opened the door. He smiled in delight and murmured: “Come in quick! Caitlin has just arrived and brought the solution to the riddle! It’s about to begin!”

“How should we... I mean, what should we do?” Jupiter asked.

“Just keep a low profile. If you don’t interfere, it’ll be all right, else I’ll figure out something.”

When The Three Investigators entered the living room, all those present turned to them. Martha Lynn winked at them. Craig and Jeremy gave a timid smile. Only Caitlin and George seemed hostile as always. However, one thing was immediately apparent—the siblings’ mood had changed. The aggression that had been in the air at the first family reunion just two weeks ago had evaporated.

“What are they doing here?” Caitlin asked and looked defiantly at Mr Quinn.

“I took the liberty of telling The Three Investigators about this meeting and inviting them,” Quinn replied.

“And what’s the point?” Caitlin snapped.

“I felt sorry for them,” Mr Quinn explained. “After all, they were really into it before we sent them home. They also found the cave of the Scuttle Bug for us. I thought they deserved a reward for that. I want them to see how the story ends.”

“We will certainly not disturb you,” Pete added. “You won’t even notice us. We are completely invisible.”

“Whatever,” Craig said indifferently, and Jeremy nodded in agreement.

Caitlin was less enthusiastic but Jupiter could see her biting her tongue to keep her sharp comments to herself. This was also a new development. Two weeks ago she would have contradicted her siblings even if she had agreed with them.

She turned away. Probably she had decided to ignore The Three Investigators.

"You were just about to give us the solution," Jeremy reminded his sister.

"Yes, I was... before these three... Well, never mind. So, I solved the riddle. It wasn't easy, but after all, it wasn't for nothing that I used to be the one who sat on the floor with Dad for hours thinking up ciphers and encryption codes together."

"Yes, you've always been our genius," Craig said. Jupiter wasn't sure whether it was meant mockingly or appreciatively.

Caitlin also gave her brother a poisonous look before she relaxed again. "I'll spare you the details. What is certain is that the result is a three-digit code... and in connection with the line '... you have to find the number, to align the steel for the way'. This can only mean one thing."

"The Home Express!" cried Jeremy. "That means the Home Express! The steel refers to the rails. The three-digit code sets the destination, aligns the rails and sets the train in motion."

"Right," Caitlin said.

"But how is the Home Express going to help us?" Craig asked without understanding. "We know where it goes. We know all the routes by heart. I still use it daily."

"It's a code that none of us have ever used," explained Caitlin. "Nine-eight-two."

"Nine-eight-two?" Craig repeated, "but with that combination, the train should not be going anywhere."

"Apparently, it does," Caitlin said.

Craig hesitated for a moment, then he stepped to a control panel that was fixed on the wall in this room.

"There are only a handful of combinations," Mr Quinn whispered to The Three Investigators. "One for every room in the house, but 'nine-eight-two' is not among them."

Craig pressed the button that called the train to him. A few seconds later, the Home Express came rattling and buzzing out of the wall into the living room and stopped right in front of Craig.

"If you're really right, Caitlin, then..." He didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he punched the code into the panel.

The Home Express immediately started to move. An astonished murmur went through the room.

"It's going," cried Jeremy. "It's going somewhere!"

"But where?" asked Caitlin.

Without moving, all those present followed the train's journey through the whole room. The locomotive blew a whistle, then the Home Express disappeared into the wall.

Suddenly everyone rushed to the door so as not to lose sight of the train. There was a brief scramble, but Caitlin's elbow strike was so forceful that she was the first to squeeze herself outside.

"It's going to the kitchen!" she shouted, and everyone streamed into the kitchen. The Home Express ran along the wall once and out the other side through a tunnel.

"Into the dining room now," cried Jeremy, and in no time everyone was back in the hall and hurried from there to the dining room.

Here too, the Home Express made a round and went out on the other side. This time it arrived in the hallway, headed for the stairs. At a junction, it decided to take the slightly

ascending branch to the first floor.

“Up!”

The three Kopperschmidt siblings, Martha Lynn, George, Anthony Quinn and The Three Investigators stumbled up the stairs and followed the train into a former children’s room. Here too, the train made its round and disappeared into the wall.

“Into the study!” Craig shouted, squeezed past the others and tore open the side door to the study. As abruptly as it had begun, the wild chase ended. The train had not appeared.

“What—” Craig exclaimed. “Where is it?”

“The train should have come out this side by now!” Caitlin remarked. “What happened?”

“I wish I knew,” Craig confessed. “It has never happened like this before.”

“Something must be wrong then!” cried Jeremy. “How can that—”

“Shh!” Jupiter hushed them and put his finger to his lips. “Be quiet! There’s a noise!”

Everyone paused, holding their breath and staring at the hole in the wall from which the Home Express should have come out. There was actually a sound. The familiar whirring, cracking and squeaking of a Mobimec. It came right out of the wall.

“The train is still there—inside the wall,” Jupiter finally whispered. “There must be a cavity, or a secret stop!”

“Dad must have created this when he built the house,” whispered Caitlin reverently.

“This is where ‘it is night and not day’. It’s dark inside the wall, so it’s always night, so to speak.”

“But that’s impossible,” Craig argued. “We should have discovered this hiding place long ago!”

“Not necessarily,” said Martha Lynn. “The train only stops at the hiding place with the secret code, otherwise, it will always pass through. No one has ever noticed that there is a stop inside the wall.”

Still the crackling and crunching sound came out of the wall.

“I wonder if that’s where Dad’s masterpiece is hidden,” whispered Caitlin.

They waited spellbound to see what would happen. Eventually the sounds faded away and the familiar hum of the Home Express resumed. Slowly it came chugging out of the wall, rolled a little forward and came to a puffing halt.

The three wagons it pulled behind it were no longer empty. A mechanism hidden in the wall had loaded them. Now the Home Express was carrying three small wooden crates, all of which bore the familiar Kopperschmidt logo. In addition, each one had a name on it —‘Craig’, ‘Caitlin’, and ‘Jeremy’.

Silently, the three siblings looked at the unexpected cargo.

“It’s just like Christmas,” whispered Caitlin. “That’s when the Home Express always brought the presents.”

When they came closer, they saw that something else had been written on the wooden boxes. Under each of their names was a two-line text in the squiggly handwriting of Felix Kopperschmidt.

Craig read aloud what was written on his box:

*The end of your hunt is near,
For all answers to appear.*

Then Caitlin read hers:

*There is still one final chase,
You have to look for a place.*

Finally, it was Jeremy's turn:

*The Teacher will show you where,
Look for my masterpiece there.*

"What does that mean?" Pete asked aloud.

"I guess we'll find out when someone opens the boxes," Jupiter remarked, earning a punishing look from Caitlin.

"Wise guy," she hissed and opened her box carefully. She looked inside and moaned softly: "Oh, no!"

"What?" asked Pete curiously. "What's in it?"

Caitlin paid no attention to him.

Now Craig and Jeremy also opened their boxes. Their reactions were sobering.

"This can't be happening!" Craig exclaimed.

"What?" Pete repeated.

Jeremy gave The Three Investigators a look. The container was filled with... well, it looked like junk at first—small copper pieces, nuts and bolts, and wires.

Bob was the first to realize what it was. "That's a Mobimec—all stripped down to its component parts."

"Wow, that's a lot of pieces," Pete remarked. "Did it break?"

"No," growled Caitlin. "This Mobimec has to be assembled..." She looked at her siblings. "... By us."

Craig and Jeremy nodded slowly. As if on command, all three turned around and left the study, carrying the boxes of Mobimec pieces in front of them like relics.

"Caitlin, what—" George began.

"We're busy now, George!" was the short answer.

Then the three siblings hurried down the stairs.

"They're going to the basement," said Mr Quinn. "There's a workshop there. They're going to assemble the Mobimec just like they learned from their father. So now it's just a matter of waiting."

The Three Investigators, George, Martha Lynn and Anthony Quinn waited a long time. Jupiter, Pete and Bob slowly paced up and down the living room and took turns listening near the basement door.

Only a few weeks ago, the three siblings would probably have been screaming at each other and slamming the doors within a very short time. However now, not the slightest sound could be heard from the basement. There was a concentrated silence.

"The last week have been truly amazing," Mr Quinn broke the silence. "While the three were busy solving the riddles, they learned to talk to each other without shouting at each other after five minutes. Of course, it's not like before, but I think they're on the right track. All three now realize that there are more important things than inheritance disputes and false pride."

Finally, after almost two hours, Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy returned to the living room. Jeremy was carrying a Mobimec in his hands. The figure looked like a teacher or professor—with a suit, strictly parted hair and thick glasses. The Mobimec was bigger than usual and stood about thirty centimetres high when Jeremy put him on the floor.

"You did it," remarked Mr Quinn. "What does he do?"

“We don’t know,” Craig replied. “We haven’t tried him yet, but we are going to do that now... Caitlin?”

Caitlin stepped forward, pulled out the key that had been in one of the boxes, got down on her knees next to the Mobimec and put the key in the keyhole at the back. Then she wound it, released the key and stepped back.

The Mobimec set itself in motion. It walked somewhat naturally as a human would do, with his arms swinging by his side. Squeaking and crunching, it walked through the room until one swinging arm hit against a wall.

Somehow the Mobimec had built-in sensors to register where he was positioned. He raised his left arm and used it to support himself against the wall. Then suddenly, a tiny pen slid out of his right wrist. With this pen, the Mobimec began to write on the white wallpaper like a teacher standing at the blackboard, holding a marker in his hand.

Jerking and twitching, but at the same time incredibly precise, the mechanical arm drew a straight horizontal line for a few centimetres, then turned a right angle and continued downwards. There were several more right angle turns before he ended with a semicircle back to the starting point. It was a complete outline of something. Then he lifted the pen and drew a cross within the outline.

Finally, he put his arms down, stepped aside to give a clear view of the drawing, before standing still. The key continued to whirl until it stopped.

The Three Investigators had observed everything with bated breath. The precision with which the Mobimec had moved was fascinating... but no less amazing was what he had done.

“That looks like a treasure map,” Pete noticed, and he turned to Craig. “Do you think that the cross indicates the place where your father’s masterpiece is hidden?”

Craig nodded. “That should be it.”

“But the question is—what does this outline show us?” Jeremy pondered. “It does not look like an island or a country or a city.”

Bob bit his lip. He had recognized the outline the second the Mobimec had finished drawing it, but it was not his task to solve this last riddle. Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy had to do it themselves. On the other hand... a little tip might not hurt.

“Maybe it’s something very obvious,” Bob said, “something directly related to your father.”

“Of course!” cried Caitlin. “It’s the outline of a building! The outline of the toy factory!”

Bob sighed in relief. That was exactly what he had thought. He had discovered this building layout during his research on the Kopperschmidt Company.

“Where is it?” asked Jupiter.

“In Simi Valley,” Craig said. “The factory has been abandoned since the end of the Kopperschmidt company.”

“—But it’s also completely empty,” Jeremy said. “The factory was the first place I looked for Dad after he went missing weeks ago. There’s nothing there.”

Instead of answering, Caitlin stepped to the wall and pointed to the drawing. “No doubt this is the toy factory—which means that’s where we have to go. All of us... Now!”

17. A Copper Egg for All

The factory was located on the outskirts of Simi Valley in a deserted, wild area. In a small valley enclosed by partly green and partly withered hills, an old, deserted-looking hall with a corrugated metal roof ducked next to a dusty car park. The way there was not even a real road, and Pete took the precaution of following Jeremy's car closely so that he would not end up in the middle of the wilderness.

The whole way here, no one had spoken a word. When The Three Investigators got out, the only sounds they heard were the chirping of crickets and the crunch of their footsteps on the dry earth.

The entrance to the factory was a rusty rolling gate that was lowered and locked, but Jeremy had a key. The rattling and clanging of the gate seemed so out of place in this environment that it sent a slight shiver down Jupiter's spine.

It was dark inside the factory. Craig felt his way to a light switch, but it didn't work. "Now what?"

"Wait, I have a flashlight in the car," Pete said and made his way back to the MG, and returned shortly afterwards with a flashlight in his hand. He handed it to Craig.

Craig switched it on and shone it into the factory building. The tables on which the Mobimecs had been painstakingly handcrafted just a few years ago were still there, but all the tools that the Kopperschmidt employees needed were no longer there. There were no more chairs, no lamps, no working materials, no cupboards. The hall looked like an orphaned aeroplane hangar—except for a strange, man-sized object that almost disappeared into the shadows at the far end.

"That thing there," Jeremy whispered. "What is it? It wasn't here last time."

"It's right on the spot where the Teacher Mobimec marked with a cross," Caitlin remarked and ran excitedly into the darkness until she was finally standing right in front of it. Everyone else followed her curiously.

It was an egg-shaped object—a copper egg, as big as a cupboard, with tarnishing welds and small hinges and screws. The light of the flashlight shimmered mysteriously on the reddish-brown surface. There was a keyhole in which a big key protruded out.

The Three Investigators had never seen anything like it, but even for the siblings, a copper egg of that size was not common.

Jeremy cleared his throat. "Do you think this is—"

"—Dad's masterpiece?" Craig said. "This must be it."

"But how did it get here?" wondered Jeremy. "Where was it before? And more importantly... what is it?"

Suddenly footsteps could be heard. They approached from a shadow in the far corner of the hall. Everyone turned around and stared with bated breath into the darkness.

Craig lifted the flashlight. The light cone trembled slightly. Then they saw someone coming towards them. The person was dressed all in black and had a distinguished walk.

"You'll know when you operate it," the person said.

"The Black Lady," Craig said. "I... I mean, Mrs Loughlin."

"What are you doing here?" Caitlin asked.

"I was expecting you," the Black Lady replied.

"You knew we were coming?" Caitlin asked.

Virginia Loughlin nodded.

"That means you knew all along where Dad's masterpiece was hidden," Caitlin said.
"Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because it was important that you find your own way here... all together." Mrs Loughlin said.

"Do you know where our father is?" Jeremy asked.

She nodded for the second time.

"Then tell us!" Jeremy demanded.

"If you save his masterpiece from destruction, he will come back on his own," she replied mysteriously.

"From destruction?" asked Caitlin. "But... it is intact right before us here! Nothing can happen now... can it?"

"That's just a shell. Your father's masterpiece is inside."

"What is it?" continued Caitlin.

"Find out for yourself," the Black Lady replied, pointing invitingly at the egg.

Caitlin hesitated. "We don't know what will happen until we wind it up."

Virginia Loughlin smiled. "It will open."

Again everyone stared at the copper egg and tried to imagine what might be inside. Caitlin already reached for the key, but then she paused. She lowered her hand and looked at Craig. "Would you like to?"

Craig was visibly surprised by her offer, but then he shook his head with a smile and shone the flashlight at her. "You go ahead."

Caitlin turned the key. Crackling, a spring could be heard winding up inside the egg. With each turn, the tension grew in everyone there. In a few moments, they would discover the secret of Felix Kopperschmidt's masterpiece.

Caitlin let go of the key. For five seconds, it buzzed and cracked inside the egg, the shell trembled slightly, and everyone involuntarily took a step back. Then suddenly a beam of light broke out of a tiny crack in the upper half of the shell. The crack became wider, the light brighter, and finally the egg illuminated half of the hall. Another crack appeared, running across the first, and now divided the upper half of the egg into four segments, which slowly folded outwards like a flower opening.

The light was so bright that The Three Investigators were too dazzled for a few seconds to see anything, but then, when the egg had opened completely, the light dimmed until it finally shone a warm yellow on the object that was inside—the object on which all eyes were now fixed.

It was a photo in a metal frame.

Hesitantly they approached closer. Finally, Jupiter recognized who was depicted in the photo. It was Felix Kopperschmidt in his younger years and his three children—Caitlin as a little girl sat on her father's lap, Jeremy stood beside her, and Craig as a teenager leaned against Felix's shoulders on the other side. All four beamed into the camera. It was one happy family.

Everyone stared at the photo in silence. No one moved. An eerie silence spread out. The tension of the last hours disappeared and left an irritating emptiness.

"I... I don't understand," Caitlin finally whispered. "This is supposed to be the masterpiece?"

For a moment, no one knew the answer. Then Mrs Loughlin explained: “When I said the masterpiece is inside, I didn’t mean the inside of the egg.”

“But—” Caitlin began.

“It’s in us,” Jeremy took over. “We... we are the masterpiece.”

Again, there was silence for seconds.

“The greatest thing Felix Kopperschmidt ever created is us—his children, his family,” Jeremy continued.

“Can this really be true?” asked Caitlin in disbelief.

““It was quite a long time ago, I created a masterpiece—something that gives me so much joy, that I believe would never cease...’,” Craig quoted his father’s poem from memory. “The three of us were always the most important thing in the world to Dad—the most wonderful and precious thing that came long before his work. ‘The greatest enemy I’ve known, will soon destroy my masterpiece.’”

Craig sighed and started to explain, but Jeremy beat him to it. “Envy, resentment, hatred. They are the worst enemy Dad ever knew... and they destroyed our family years ago.”

Craig nodded. “The fight that broke out over Mum’s bequest turned the once happy Kopperschmidt family into a bunch of strangers who were completely at odds with each other. Dad kept trying to reconcile us with each other... but we didn’t listen to him. We were too stubborn, too proud, and too opinionated—for years. Eventually, Dad gave up.”

“—And he was heartbroken over it,” Caitlin continued in a soundless voice. “He told me many times... and I knew how much it hurt him that his family was broken up, but we were not able to leap over our own shadow.” Caitlin’s gaze wandered from brother to brother, but there was no blame in her words or in her eyes.

She approached the photo and stroked the frame. “Do you know what this means?”

“What do you think?” Jeremy asked.

“That we are here—all of us,” Craig said, “that after a week of guessing, we’re standing in front of this photo. What could this mean?”

“Dad made it all up!” Caitlin said. “He invented and built this whole mystery hunt and every single Mobimec. He laid out tracks and scattered clues. He prepared and planned everything down to the last detail... and then he disappeared... for one reason...” She turned to Craig and Jeremy. “—So we can talk to each other.”

The two brothers looked at her in bewilderment.

“My precious children,” a voice suddenly echoed across the room. All heads turned and stared at the opened rolling door, which was only faintly visible against the darkness. A man stood there and looked in their direction.

Slowly he stepped towards the group. He was small and wiry and wore blue overalls. His hair was snow-white and his face was marked by countless laugh lines. In his eyes was something sly and youthful... and at the same time, there was a deep sadness. He didn’t seem to notice The Three Investigators or the other companions.

Felix Kopperschmidt only had eyes for his children.

18. A Masterpiece for Felix

He looked from Caitlin to Jeremy to Craig, who were frozen.

"I knew you'd be the first to see through my plan, Caitlin... and that you would get your brother and sister together, Jeremy... and that you would persevere with all your persistence, Craig.

"This little mystery hunt was the only option I could think of. I knew if anything in the world that could bring the three of you back together, it was to worry about your missing old dad."

In the meantime, Felix Kopperschmidt stood right in front of his daughter and gently stroked her hair. Tears gleamed in Caitlin's eyes.

"You are here. You have solved all the riddles, but there's one thing I still don't know—did my plan work?"

Caitlin looked at her brothers. Jeremy nodded his head... and finally Craig.

Felix Kopperschmidt lowered his head and smiled.... and then Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy finally fell into the arms of their father.

The First Investigator turned away a little ashamed and whispered: "We should leave, fellas! This is really a family matter now."

Pete and Bob nodded, turned around and left the hall as unobtrusively as possible. As they stood outside under the clear starry sky, they noticed that George had followed them out. He stepped towards them. The expression on his face was hard to read.

"Say, what's going on here, boys?" he asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Jupiter asked.

"No! It's not at all! I have now understood the thing about Caitlin's father and the masterpiece, but what did you three boys have to do with it?"

Bob laughed. "Nothing. That was the problem." He told George how The Three Investigators had come across the case, how they had solved the mystery and what they had encountered in their investigation. "We were constantly being followed and threatened... and to be honest with you, most of the time, we suspected you."

George couldn't believe his ears. "Me? But this is the first time I'm hearing about all this."

"That is clear to us by now," continued Jupiter, "but for the threats, theoretically, you were always a possibility, but we now know that it was almost always Mr Quinn who tried to stop us from investigating."

"He was the one who left us the decapitated Mobimec," Pete said, "and hung the coffin thing at the gate before fending off Juve that night. He just didn't know what else to do."

"—But he lost his bunch of keys in the attack," Bob continued, "and that was, after all, the crucial clue. The keys had an 'I Love San Francisco' tag on it. We thought they were yours, but when we followed you and finally landed at Craig's place, I discovered a postcard from San Francisco on the fridge in the kitchen. I looked at it. It was from Anthony Quinn, and the handwriting was identical to the one on the shopping list! So I decided to try the key I found at Mr Quinn's place. I found out his address, drove over there and the key fits. Mr

Quinn finally told me the whole story—how Felix had worked with him to hatch a plan to send his children on a mystery hunt that would change their relationship.”

“Everyone was in on it,” continued Jupiter. “Mrs Loughlin, Mr Quinn and Martha Lynn. Everyone wanted the three siblings to get back together. Everyone saw to it that the three of them devoted themselves to the mystery. Mr Kopperschmidt had developed the riddles so that his three children could only solve them together.

“He had a riddle about history, theology and plants for Craig, who is well versed in all three areas. Caitlin, the smart one, got a number riddle... and Jeremy, who does free climbing in his spare time, got the riddle that requires physical effort.”

“—But as luck would have it, this combination also worked for us,” Pete continued. “Bob was able to solve the riddle of the saints through his research. For Jupe, the number riddle was a piece of cake—well, almost... and I was the only one who dared to climb the red tower. That, of course, got in the way of the whole plan.”

George nodded thoughtfully. “So you solved the riddles when Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy should have... and the others tried to stop you. Why didn’t they just tell you about everything?”

“They did not know whether they could trust us,” Jupiter explained. “So Mr Quinn didn’t lay his cards on the table until Bob confronted him.”

“One thing I still don’t understand—who shot at Pete at the red tower?” George asked. “It couldn’t have been Mr Quinn, because if I understood correctly, you hadn’t met him at the time.”

“I did that,” a voice said from behind them.

Virginia Loughlin stepped out of the hall smiling and walked towards The Three Investigators and George. “I can see the red tower from my apartment window. Whenever possible, I was to keep an eye on the tower after Mr Quinn had someone put the package there a few days earlier. It’s not uncommon for young people to climb the tower, and I didn’t want them to find the package.”

She turned to the Second Investigator and said: “I hope you can forgive me for that little fright.”

“Well, to be honest, it was quite a shock,” Pete said, but then he smiled. “Anyway, I’ve already got over it.”

Mrs Loughlin continued: “When I spotted you at the tower, you were midway and somewhat not moving at that time. So I fired a warning shot above you to prevent you from going up. I’ve always been a good shot, and I aimed far enough past you, of course. After that, I saw you scrambling down so I thought I had kept you away from the top... but as we knew later, you had already taken the package.”

“But why did you give the three boys the Boy Scout two days later?” George asked Mrs Loughlin. “You knew it was meant for Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy.”

“That’s right, but the day before, the three siblings met at Felix’s house for the first time in years... and that meeting was disastrous. You should know as you were there. Felix’s plan didn’t seem to work because his children couldn’t pull themselves together despite the supposed danger their father was in.

“So I followed a spontaneous intuition. When Jupiter, Pete and Bob suddenly appeared at my door, I thought competition is good for business. If three rascals—excuse me, boys—are suddenly after their father’s secret, perhaps this will motivate Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy to finally get down to business and forget their argument... but that only worked part of the way.

“So we—Anthony, Martha Lynn and I—had to make sure that The Three Investigators would get out of this, but these boys are hard to shake off, I must say. Once they smell a mystery, neither gunfire nor chopped-off Mobimec heads can stop them.”

“Well, Virginia, are you clearing up the last loose ends?” Anthony Quinn and Martha Lynn approached the group. Both were in high spirits.

“What’s it like in there?” asked the Black Lady.

“Very good,” said Martha Lynn. “I’m sure the four of them have a lot to talk about now. We’d better not disturb them.”

“At first you had no idea that these three boys had found the first riddle, did you?” George said to Mr Quinn.

“No. I thought it was just lost. Felix and I had written a spare riddle. I was just about to bring it into play when Jupiter suddenly pulled an ace from his sleeve and presented us with the cave of the Scuttle Bug. Only then did I realize how much these three could get in our way.”

“We’re really sorry, Mr Quinn,” Jupiter said, “but we had no idea about the whole plan... and like Mrs Loughlin said, when we smell a mystery, it’s hard to get rid of us.”

“One last question has occurred to me in the last few days,” Bob said. “Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy came to The Jones Salvage Yard within two days of each other to enquire about Mobimecs. That was how we became aware of the case in the first place, but that wasn’t a coincidence, was it?”

Martha Lynn laughed. “No, it wasn’t. Felix, Virginia, Anthony and I suspected that sending the parts of the Scuttle Bug would not necessarily get the three of them to contact each other. So we made an additional effort to see whether we could make them run into each other by chance or by some kind of connection. It was a long shot... so, weeks before, we had mentioned Mr Jones’s junk dealings on several occasions, and that anyone could find anything there, including Mobimecs.

“When Craig, Caitlin and Jeremy finally got the parcels, they remembered and went to the salvage yard one by one—but as we now know, their paths did not cross there. However, you three made the connection for us. Like I said, it was a long shot, but it worked to a certain extent.”

This cleared up all the open questions. Little by little, the group disintegrated until only The Three Investigators remained at the former factory premises of the Kopperschmidt Company.

Above them the stars sparkled crystal clear, the crickets chirped in the undergrowth and a warm breeze blew through the night. Suddenly there was nothing sinister about this place, only something very peaceful. Thoughtfully they strolled back to Pete’s MG.

“And what do we learn from this adventure?” the Second Investigator broke the silence.

“—That after a successfully solved case, someone doesn’t always end up in jail,” Bob said.

“Yeah, that too,” Pete said, “but I was actually getting at something else.”

“And what’s that?” Bob wondered.

“That we should always talk to each other... about anything,” Pete said, “not just in the family, but among friends.”

“Hear, hear,” Jupe remarked.

“Go ahead and make fun, Jupe. You know exactly what I’m talking about. The Kopperschmidts showed us how bad it can go. Do you want us to end up like that?”

“Us?” repeated Jupiter. “Why us?”

“Come on, Jupe, don’t play dumb. The three of us don’t always talk to each other either. The story with Lys is the best example, and I think we should change that. So what happened between you two?”

The First Investigator sighed resignedly. “Are you seriously going to make this an issue now?”

Pete nodded. “Yes, I do—for the sake of our friendship.”

Jupiter rolled his eyes. “Even though I don’t always understand your pathetic ideas of friendship, Pete, it was all about me. It was like this...”

When The Three Investigators stopped talking, the sun was already rising over Rocky Beach.